This Is Almost As Long As My Master's Thesis: A Meta About Minecraft, Real Person Fiction, and the Fandom That Changed Everything

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This Is Almost As Long As My Master's Thesis: A Meta About Minecraft, Real Person Fiction, and the Fandom That Changed Everything

by ghostwriterofthemachine

Summary

> Here are my overall goals for the next 32,000 words you're about to strap yourself in for. I am going to attempt to articulate and analyze what draws people to write RPF about specific public figures as opposed to others. I am going to talk about why RPF makes people uncomfortable and the impulses behind those feelings, and then unpack them as much as I can. Then I am going to go back to Dream SMP, break down this very interesting fandom a little bit, ask the big "Okay, so IS this RPF?" question, hold it up to the light, and then use it as a way to hold a mirror to that fandom and examine some current attitudes and anxieties about RPF in general. We are going to dig into both that question and the fandom space and see where it takes us.

Or: Good people of AO3, I present to you—

THE BIG DAMN META.

Notes

"Wow, ghostwriterofthemachince has only posted six fanworks this year. I wonder if they have writer's block."
"Well! It's been more of an active hostage situation, actually."

Which is to say. God. fuck. I'd say I don't even care anymore but that's a lie. I care so much but I've got no more words. This is probably going to get me a barrage of hate comments and I know that but I physically need to publish it anyway because holy fucking shit this has been my whole year. I could spend the next three months editing it and going over it and tweaking it but the idea of this project extending into *2026* makes me want to die. I would just perish. It needs to be out of my documents.

Happy holidays, have the new most insane thing I've ever written. Yeah, actually for real this time. I think I'd need to work really hard to write something more insane than this.

It take a village to be this unhinged, so. Thank you to the always-beloved Letters for letting me lose my mind in his DMs for the last several months about this, and for his eyes on the final product; Bee, for being my K-pop correspondent; Alan, for having a better mind for formal argument structure than some college professors I know; Juno and Em, for beta

reading this monstrosity; Eve, for playing my skeptic and filling me in on some insane Dan & Phil lore; and antimony_medusa for essentially letting me show up to her DMs like a stray cat except instead of looking for tuna I was looking for first-hand insight on this fandom.

This is the part where I usually say enjoy, so like. Enjoy.

Chapter 1: LET'S BRIEFLY DISCUSS RPF (lying, it's not brief)

This Is Almost As Long As My Master's Thesis: A Meta About Minecraft, Real Person Fiction, and the Fandom That Changed Everything, AKA—

The Big Damn Meta

"This is complete fiction, and implies nothing about the people whose names are utilized. If you got here by googling yourself or because a fan linked you, you should click the back button."

This sentence was, in many ways, the hand that guided me into reading RPF. It is the disclaimer version of an old friend. Nearly every old-school Bandom fic (let's say from 2003 until 2014) worth its salt tossed it in front of the story, and it outlined the rules of this space explicitly and well:

1. This is a fantasy using the names and likenesses of a real person, but the person writing it is under no impression that it's true.
2. This is not even a little bit for the people whose names and likenesses are being used, and if that person is seeking this kind of thing out, they are going against the wishes of the person writing it. It exists in a totally different sphere than those people in reality.
3. At least on a subconscious level, the acknowledgement and acceptance that the writer is indulging in something a little bit weird*, and that's totally okay here. We're rolling with the weird because we are having fun.

(*A note, before we go any further, on "weirdness": I know that this has become a charged word for a lot of people, and I know that there are regional differences as to how it is perceived. Please know that I am using this word affectionately and positively. This is weird like what we want to keep Austin TX, this is weird the way roadside attractions are weird, this is weird in the way of high schoolers with dip-dyed hair barking at their bullies. We are in a weird [positive] zone. I've been calling myself weird joyfully since I was 13 and I'm not going to stop now. Weird, in the context of this meta, is just anything a little off the beaten path that you maybe wouldn't want to show your mom.)

If I haven't made it obvious yet, the above disclaimer was a fantastic guiding hand into this little corner of the internet. The best one I could have asked for. In two sentences, here are the rules. Follow them and have fun. And, over the years, I've had a lot of fun!

This is all to say that I am not new to the world of RPF. Honestly, some of my first introductions to greater fandom spaces in general was through RPF—MCR/Bandom was everywhere from 2009 until 2015 or so and, yes, I was totally in the circles of middle schoolers who looked up Ferard fic at sleepovers.

I would also argue that, in the grand landscape of web fandom history, Bandom—as it used to be defined, with My Chemical Romance, Fall Out Boy and Panic! At the Disco (the original lineup) being at the forefront and the rest of the Fueled By Ramen bands being pulled along by association and force of personality—deserves to be in the hall of fame. My first

introduction to the fandom Big Bang as a concept was through Bandom and, though the credit for creating that concept goes, as so many early web fandom things do, to the Harry Potter/Drarry fandom, BBB ran like clockwork for literally an entire fucking decade and took only a 3 year hiatus before coming back. To this day, the people I think of as the Old Guard of LiveJournal Podfic (reena_jenkins and Opalsong being two of the most prolific) have Bandom high up on their stats. Bandom fucking ruled LiveJournal, or at least that's what it felt like to me, as a young teen poking around on LiveJournal trying to see what was there.

With that history in mind, it probably won't shock you to find out that I have always been a little bit confused by the moral pearl clutching that has developed around RPF as a concept. Not the *dislike*, mind you—look up at those original rules again, most people who engage with RPF are very aware that they are being a little bit weird and doing something that isn't for everyone—but the moral backlash against it. The idea that RPF is somehow uniquely bad and harmful. That it's not only weird, but weird in a way that is dangerous; weird in a way that people feel the need to Do Something About and protect people from.

And that's why this meta exists, I guess.

Well, no. To be honest, this meta exists because I accidentally read millions of words of MCYT and specifically DSMP fanfic in the waning months of 2024 into 2025, years after the fandom's most rabid hay-day (and just in time to witness some ongoing drama, oh joy), at first pretty fandom blind (I was originally just going backwards through the freeform Gladiators tag, trying to find something to fulfill a craving, and then I was curious as to why there was so much Minecraft fic there, and then things spiraled). After discovering that this was an RPF fandom which claimed that it wasn't RPF, I subsequently developed an academic fascination for it (and have since sought out the source material to the best of my ability). (also a lot of the fics were really, really good.)

I ended up going through something of a journey myself, from a hackles-raised "what do you *mean* these writers are insisting that this isn't RPF?," to "oh, huh, okay, there's a whole wide and wonderful world here I was unaware of, I see the point people are making," to "wait, actually, hold up again," to "you know what, I think there's something more complicated going on here."

And when I find something complicated, I want to pick at it until it unravels all its secrets to me.

That journey was interesting and enlightening enough that I wanted to record it. I also think that, because of that journey, this little corner of the internet can be used as a really useful lens for the growing and changing attitudes towards RPF as a whole, in addition to holding up a mirror to changing trends in fandom. And I'm going to try to explain that here.

Of course, there are people within this community who have already articulated their thoughts and written meta that explores similar subject matter. I'm hoping to bring two new perspectives/lenses to the conversation: as said, I came into this space as a relative outsider to the MCYT phenomenon, and I also came into it as a relative veteran of other, more traditional RPF spaces. I'm hoping that POV can open up something new for people.

Here are my overall goals for the next 32,000 words you're about to strap yourself in for. I am going to attempt to articulate and analyze what draws people to write RPF about specific public figures as opposed to others. I am going to talk about why RPF makes people uncomfortable and the impulses behind those feelings, and then unpack them as much as I can. Then I am going to go back to Dream SMP, break down this very interesting fandom a little bit, ask the big "Okay, so IS this RPF?" question, hold it up to the light, and then use it as a way to hold a mirror to that fandom and examine some current attitudes and anxieties about RPF in general. We are going to dig into both that question and the fandom space and see where it takes us.

Why do I want to do this? Because, unfortunately, I have an MA in English and have dedicated a truly pathetic amount of my life to upper-level literature academia, which means that I am hard wired to Analyzing Things I Think Have Implications. And this is one of them!

If you love RPF, I hope this will be interesting to you. If you're not sure why RPF exists but you're curious, I hope this will be informative to you. If you're uncomfortable with the concept of RPF, thank you for having an open enough mind to click on this in the first place, and I hope this will be enlightening and accessible to you as well.

HOWEVER. If you are here to Laugh At And Mock The Awful Freaks, however you define them, this is not the place for you. You can go to my AO3 profile right now and find Hockey RPF. This AO3 account was made in the first place to post Rooster Teeth/Achievement Hunter RPF (now long-orphaned, because I wrote them when I was 17). I am not here to shame, ridicule, or hurt. My goal is to approach every subject that comes up with open-mindedness and empathy, even the most cringe of internet tweens and, honestly, the most intense of pearl clutchers. If you are here to freak mock, you probably aren't going to find much here you enjoy. Leave the rudest comment you like and I'll just leave it there so everyone can see it forever, which I do truly think is punishment enough.

I went into this with questions, and thoughts, and theories. Throughout the process of writing it, like any good piece of academia, I discovered new things about my thoughts and refined those questions, and thoughts, and theories. Do I have an answer? Not really—nothing ever has a concrete answer, particularly not in the humanities. But I do have, I hope, some insight.

So let's start out at the very beginning (a very good place to start). We are starting there because, in order to analyze *why* people have the reaction they do to RPF, we need to understand where it comes from, and my first argument is "RPF is not actually that 'weird' an impulse." What impulses create RPF? Let's ask the question:

Part I. Why Is RPF (Conceptual)?

The first thing we need to establish is that RPF is in no way a *new* phenomenon. It was not born in the social media age; it just got louder then. There's a tradition here that people are working within.

Of course, people have been making up and telling stories about celebrities for as long as we've had celebrities (that's how we got a lot of libel laws, after all). But even if we look only at the modern fandom movement, there were documented "pop slash" (largely focusing

on boy bands like the Backstreet Boys and NSYNC) sites and listservs in the ‘90s for instance, granted they were pretty niche. This is obviously an instinct that comes from somewhere.

When trying to answer a “why” question, a great place to begin is to identify the goal of the thing you are analyzing. However, looking for an overall goal of RPF is difficult because there are very different types of RPF out there, all of them with very different objectives and very different vibes.

With this in mind and for the sake of this argument, I propose three different overarching and general categories of RPF:

- Crack fic
- Diary RPF
- Narrative RPF

Within each of these categories, it is easier to start finding that goal.

The first one is, I think, fairly self explanatory. Crack is one genre that’s basically always exactly the same, for better or for worse, across all fandoms. It’s absurd. It’s silly. It’s usually a little cursed. It’s the place where the ghosts of the XD random era still echo through the halls of the internet.

This is all to say that crack RPF fics are jokes, and the RPF part of them are used to make the joke funnier. This is your “Martha Stewart and Thomas the Tank Engine team up to teach Sasuke the joys of gay sex” fics. This is your “Pete Wentz meets Alexander Hamilton and introduces him to Smash Mouth” fics. If your knee jerk reaction to what you are reading is “um, hey, excuse me, what the fuck?,” then the fic has met its goal.

There are also entries into this genre of fic that are incredibly edgy on purpose (you don’t need to look far to find something that incorporates historical or modern day dictators or murderers, for instance), but edgy jokes you don’t find funny still have the same goal as jokes you do find funny. I will also say that, just anecdotally, most of these fics are written by the young (this is a very 17-year-old type of humor), or by people who are being dared or egged on by hysterically laughing friends to write the most cursed shit imaginable (personally, I’ve witnessed “silly typo evolves to friends writing car fucking”—don’t ask—first hand).

I will also say that some of the smarter entries into this genre, almost certainly not written by teenagers and almost all of them modern political RPF, aren’t dissimilar from more formal types of political satire. It’s a more private form of satire, for sure, but it’s still using humor to take those in power down a peg.

There isn’t that much of a difference between a fic where Trump and Putin go on a date and make each other friendship bracelets and maybe have sex about it and a mediocre SNL skit about the same thing, is what I’m saying, and if writing omegaverse with conservative politicions makes someone feel like they've taken back control from those assholes, I'm all for it.

Goal/The Why: absurd humor and/or making cathartic fun of people in power.

The next category takes a little more explanation but, once it's explained, I also think it's pretty easy to understand. I have dubbed this "diary RPF," because I imagine it's the kind of thing that people used to write in their diaries before the Dawn of the Internet.

These are written-out fantasies about celebrities, either by themselves, interacting with the reader/writer, or interacting with another celebrity the author is fantasizing about.

Within the category of "diary RPF" is all manner of /reader stories, both one-off fics that focus on sex and longer-form stories about how you are sold off to One Direction, or how Henry Cavill saves you from poverty in a dystopian hellscape city, or how hockey player Jack Hughes just met you in a coffee shop and can't get you off his mind. It also encapsulates fics that only focus on two famous figures who have no connection to each other that the author finds hot having sex, sometimes but not always with a concentration on a specific kink or fetish. In addition, it can also be writing which just kind of…focuses on one aspect of this famous person, in a way that the person writing finds appealing (I have totally seen fics floating around which are just meditations on how cute the writer thinks x-person's feet are, as an example).

They're not all sexual either, for the record. There are lots and lots of /reader fics that focus on dating or emotional h/c or having a fun adventure or all manner of other subjects. I think this can even apply to a specific flavor of vent fic, wherein the writer gives their exact pain to a figure and lets them work it out, or be loved and helped the way they wish they were. But the point here is that diary RPF always focuses on one of those *personal fantasies,* be they sexual or emotional.

I think the goal of these fics is really obvious: fantasies are pleasurable and fun to think about, people who write may enjoy writing those fantasies out and, if you have them written out and you have a platform filled with like-minded people and not the figure themselves*, why not share them? I don't think it needs much more of an explanation other than that.

(*we are going to be returning to this in a later part of this argument in great depth, but note that it's VERY important; These fantasies are harmless and fine and fun, but you MUST share them far away from where the public figure can see them, and never with the public figure themselves. This is gremlin4gremlin writing, never to leave gremlin spaces. Again, go back to the diary analogy—no one wants their diary published in the newspaper. But, as I said, pin in that, we'll get back to it in depth a little later.)

Also, as another side note—I've discovered in my research for this meta and through a poll I made in preparation for it that a lot of people have some deeply fucking regressive views of sexual fantasies and don't realize they're regressive. So just in case no one has ever said it to you: it's totally normal to have crushes on or fantasies about famous people. In fact, I would argue that one of the main societal purposes of a celebrity is to be a figure the average person can safely fantasize about. You aren't bad for having them; you aren't bad for feeling like you'd like to write them out; you're not bad for feeling like "oh this might be fun to share." There's no such thing as a thought crime. Yes, that goes for everyone. (Yes, even men who you don't like, person in the notes of said research poll spouting TERF nonsense either on purpose or by mistake. Male sexuality isn't evil and men are just as free to have fun and harmless fantasies in their mind as anyone else, thanks. Fuck TERFs btw.)

Goal/The Why: Everyone has fantasies, and sometimes it's fun to share them.

Interestingly, over the course of my research for this meta, I have discovered that there is a perception from people who don't interact with RPF much, or at all, that diary RPF is what *most* RPF is. As in, most people who are writing or interacting with RPF are writing and reading smut content.

However, my experience—and I think the numbers on AO3 back this up—that's not exactly true? People are always going to have fantasies and enjoy sharing them in settings where it's allowed, but to say that's the bulk of what RPF is would be a misnomer.

That brings us to our third category: Narrative RPF.

Narrative RPF is a fic where the main draw is the story you are sending the blorbos on. It's saying "What if all the members of MCR were space pirates?," and then spending however many words on that concept as you'd like. Maybe some people fall in love along the way, maybe there is some kissing, but the main appeal isn't the fantasy of emotional intimacy or sex—it's the story itself. It's the fact that this is a story not only about MCR, but about *space pirates.*

If the fic asks the question "what if BTS were all witches and half of them worked in a magical coffee shop," that's narrative RPF. Same for "what if everything was the same except this famous sports man was secretly trans and trying to navigate professional sports," or "What if everything was the same but the best hockey player of this generation was an cis woman and she was still at the top of the NHL?" If it's asking "What if we took this lighthearted Minecraft Let's Play about fighting in a tournament to be the king seriously, treated it like Game of Thrones, and wrote it as a political drama?"

There can be some overlap here with diary RPF, of course, because in some way all fiction is fantasy, and these stories often incorporate romance (and sex scenes) into them. But you see what I mean when I say that the core impulse here is different; "I want to think about Gerard Way having sex" and "I want to think about Gerard Way being a space pirate captain and going on a journey to free his crew from the evil government" come from a different kind of impulse. It's about something different than indulging in a physical or emotional fantasy.

This is the category where the goal is the hardest to nail down. Partially because the stories it tells are so widely varied, partially because I think the answer is a little more complex than "it's funny" or "fantasies are natural and fun."

The appeal here seems to be the intersection of this figure's narrative with the new, constructed narrative of this story. Or to work that figure's existing narrative into something more structured and deliberate, with more of a focus on Themes. The "why" here seems to be —

Goal/The Why: The narratives themselves

I am mostly going to be focusing on this branch of fic for the rest of this meta, because I think that "why" is the most ripe for the kind of analysis I want to be doing. The other two categories not only both explain their own existence, they also look much the same across

fandoms and media. In this case, I am interested in the what and the why of the stories being told.

And, I think, it flows very nicely into my next question:

Part II: Why is RPF (The Subjects)?

I have spent so much time thinking about this, you have no idea. Why do some public figures get fanfic written about them, and others do not? Why are there over 13,000 fics in the Fall Out Boy fandom tag (and that's not even counting the older fics that are just in the general Bandom tag), and only 95 in the All American Rejects tag, a band that was also very popular around the same time? Why do people write fic about hockey player Sidney Crosby and not, say, soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo, a figure much more in the spotlight and general consciousness? Why is it that, according to Wikipedia, the top three most followed Twitch streamers in the world at the time of writing have a combined 59.2 million followers, and yet their tags on AO3 combine for less than 200 fics?

So, going back to those categories: figures get written into Crack RPF because they offer the best punchline, and figures get written into Diary RPF because the writer thinks they are appealing in some way.

To attract Narrative RPF, however, you seem to need some combination of the following:

1. Shockingly deep Lore/a sense of mythology.
2. A group of people who fit into, on purpose or by accident, specific roles or tropes.
3. At least one aspect which is actually pretty overtly structured narrative anyway.
4) A pretty intense fanbase filled with people who might write fic to begin with,
OR
4.5) attachment to an IP with that very dedicated fanbase.
5) Some aspects of active audience participation.

And now let me take this one at a time!

1) Shockingly deep Lore and mythos.

Like I said, this is about narratives. The narrative has to be compelling. Some examples:

Panic! At the Disco's origin has been mythologized thusly: Two childhood best friends from the ass-end of Vegas form a cover band with their friend from another school. One of them has a difficult homelife (he writes the songs, of course), the other is playing support as best he can (naturally, he is the drummer. Very steady, him). Their friend brings this weird musical Mormon kid from his school with him to band practice one day so they can have enough guitars to play Blink 182. In the middle of practice, the weird Mormon kid starts to sing along. As soon as he hears this incredible voice, the songwriter stops the practice, points at this guy he just met, and says "You are our singer now and you're our ticket out of this shitty town." And, against all odds, against awful parents and the goddamn Mormon church, he's *right.*

Is that how it *actually* happened? Almost certainly not. But that's how the story got told, and, fuck, isn't that compelling? Isn't that just pure romance?

Dan and Phil of Phandom fame present a once-in-a-lifetime story of strangers —> one-sided admiration —> best friends and roommates (and more: pin in that particular revelation). MCR's formation, eras, and public connection and falling outs with other bands and figures is so cinematic it feels scripted. That story literally starts with a suicidally depressed 20-something and a terrorist attack and ends with an arena screaming *"I am not afraid to keep on living.*" Hollywood can't write a story that good.

This type of fandom—the kind that writes fics for *anything*—is all about digging into what you love. There needs to be something to dig into. There needs to be layers you can peel back and dissect. There needs to be a *mythology.*

2) A group of people who fit, on purpose or by accident, specific roles or tropes.

Both narratives and the humans that tell them love categories. They love archetypes. They love tropes. It signals to the person watching that this is Something They Understand and can relate to. And when a group of figures is popular, they are often playing into this either on purpose or by accident.

For instance, this is why boy bands from all cultures end up with a lot of fic written for them. It's been a cliche since boy bands were invented that each of the members is "the ___ one." The face, the bad boy, the pretty one, the boy-next-door. Fandom loves tropes, and tropes make it very easy to see where two narratives can intersect in interesting ways. Who should be the captain of this spaceship??? Why, The Face, of course!!! Who is the one who shows The Leader that the space government might be corrupt? The Bad Boy!!

Everyone who has ever complained about an Incorrect Quotes blog already knows that fanon will do this to characters anyway—reduce them down to one role/convenient tagline—and something like a boy band comes pre-packaged and ready for trope-ifying.

Outside of boy bands, sometimes, when people are making any kind of structured content, these kinds of dynamics often just kind of pop up naturally, or are easily assigned by people watching. Someone gets dubbed Team Dad (god, pity the person who gets dubbed Team Dad. Or any parental figure. They are about to be done dirty by the fandom for the next 50 years). Take something like Achievement Hunter, where early videos separated the original group of six into "the lads" and "the gents," and then everyone fell very neatly into their role—cynical leader, emotional hothead, quiet-and-snarky, chaos twink, etc.

Notoriously bland and hierarchy-addicted hockey players are much easier to assign these roles (The Fearless Captain, His Dedicated Second, Weird and Mysterious Goalie, Young Hothead Rookie) than figures in other sports. (There's also a lot of other reasons why hockey gets a lot of fic, but that's another meta, good lord).

These tropes then help people structure their stories, and offer archetypes to build around that are very appealing for fic writers.

3) At least one aspect which is actually pretty overtly structured narrative anyway.

As I said above, humans tell stories. Sometimes they are telling stories on purpose, sometimes it's more organic and accidental, but the stories get told anyway. And, more importantly, the audience is always primed to understand and synthesize something as a story or a narrative, because that's an easy way for them to process and relate to the thing they are engaging with.

It could be a concept album or a series of very story-driven music videos (K-pop loves the latter). It could be sports writing/journalism (which is all about setting up and telling stories, make no mistake). It could be gameplay that lends itself well to off-the-cuff, informal narrative (or more structured, planned narrative—again, we will get to that a little later). It could just be two people "yes, and"-ing themselves into a bit vortex so intense that said vortex becomes sentient and starts hunting them for sport.

No matter what it is, the point stands—there's some kind of story being told, that these figures are leaning into. And, when presented with a narrative, people can't help but want to elaborate on it. Transformative content will follow storytelling.

4) A pretty intense fanbase already filled with people who might write fic to begin with,

OR

4.5) attachment to an IP with that very dedicated fanbase.

Self explanatory, honestly. J2 doesn't happen if Supernatural was any other show. Lord of the Rings RPF doesn't happen if that wasn't a decades old, deeply passionate fandom willing to fall in love with behind the scenes features and also with a long tradition of ficcing obtuse texts. Conversely, at least some of the reason that the most popular streamers by follower count have comparatively little fic written about them is because, for instance, Ninja's fanbase consists primarily teenage gamer boys who (speaking incredibly generally here) are much less native to the parts of the internet where fic is being written and read. (In case you were wondering, Mr. Blevins's 19.2 million followers on Twitch has translated to 49 fics on AO3 as of writing.) (Though I do think it would be VERY funny if we changed that— /*I am shot multiple times.*)

5) Some aspects of active audience participation.

This was a very late addition to the list, but I do think it fits. If the audience feels like they are part of a story, they feel more empowered to comment on and write about the story.

So if there's some ARG (alternate reality game) element, or "the crowd votes" element, that contributes. If the creator is going "I'm going to take a prompt for the audience," that contributes.

But it also contributes if the other fanwork being made is a really big deal. If the fan art is getting wide circulation, if edits or animations are drawing positive attention (particularly from the public figures themselves), even if talk of "headcanons" starts to catch the attention of the creators or writers or a larger audience, that will spur people to write and share fanfic, because writers also want to engage creatively with this piece of media they love and their artform is, well. Fiction.

Now, I'm not saying that this is an exact diagnostic, or a hard-and-fast set of rules, or that there aren't exceptions to what I just outlined. But, in general, the things that get narrative RPF written about them have at least two or three of these going on.

I hope you can also see the connection between these principles and, for example, the kinds of events and figures who get written into historical fiction, or the people who tend to attract a lot of tabloid attention. Like I said, a big reason why I wanted to start with this was to outline the reasons why I don't think the impulse to write and engage with RPF is that much different that the impulse to respond to other types of media with fiction, even though RPF tends to make people more uncomfortable.

Which is to say that we have at last gotten to:

Part III: Why does RPF make people uncomfortable?

So here's one of the big questions, right? I feel like I've made it clear so far that this type of fanfic makes people uncomfortable just, like, generally, but we really haven't dug into the *why* of it. And, when looking for that "why" answer, I wanted something more than "It feels weird" (actually raises more "why" answers) or "it's something *weirdos* do" (literally unhelpful in every way, thanks.) (also, yeah, I'm a weirdo. What are you, a conservative??)

So I chatted with a lot of people, and I did some research, and I did some reflection on the reasons that I also felt weird going into RPF spaces years and years ago. After those steps, I was able to compile the following list (yes, one more list, I promise this is the last one for a while).

- Issues of consent with the subject
- Parasocial issue: it assumes a closer connection to the subject than actually exists
- It is inherently sexualizing/fetishizing, which is bad
- Uncomfortable blending between fiction and reality, similar to uncanny valley
- It is invading the privacy of the subject somehow
- It may lead to IRL negative consequences for the subject
- It is dehumanizing to the subject

And then I did what any amateur fandom scholar does—I made a poll on tumblr, which you can view here.

PLEASE NOTE. This is not a good sample size for many, many reasons, and there is not enough data here to prove any statistical significance. This is not data I would ever put in front of an institution with any academic accreditation and I am not claiming this, like, proves anything. I was just trying to get a larger pool of opinions I could look through in one place, which I do think this did effectively, all things considered.

Before we go any further, I do want to say this—I am going to pick apart the impulses that these reasons come from, generally comment on the attitudes behind a few of them, and outright push back on a few others. However, if you do not like RPF and never want to read it, *I am not necessarily trying to change your mind here.* If this is something that squicks you out and you just never want to interact with it, that's a perfectly reasonable boundary to set. I will always live and die by YKISNMKATO and I apply it widely. What I am commenting on is not these emotional reactions, it's the moral weight some people put behind those emotional reactions and how they use that to justify RPF being something that is uniquely bad.

Moving onward: There are a few items on this list I want to address only briefly, and will do so now. First, **"Uncomfortable blending between fiction and reality, similar to uncanny valley"** is something I can only really shrug at and say, "Okay, fair." Yeah, I can track the logic of RPF inducing feelings of unreality in someone, and if that's how you feel and it makes you uncomfortable, I really can't argue with it. I would love to pick your brain about whether you get similar feelings of unreality when watching biopics? I personally can find those uncomfortable, particularly if the subject is still alive, I do wonder what the line is for that with people. Nevertheless!

Next, the idea that RPF uniquely **invades the privacy of the subject** which is going to be quick because, I'll be honest, I still don't really get it? (And also it was the second lowest response in the poll that wasn't the "other" option and, from my conversations with people, isn't at the front of people's minds most of the time.) Unless you think any ideal speculation on the lives and identities of public figures is an invasion of privacy, this seems like an issue of something that may FEEL a certain way, but that feeling isn't reflected in reality.

I suspect this comes from an idea that RPF leads to people digging through someone's personal life to find evidence of their "ship being real"—I know this is something that happens, but it is something that is far more attached to tabloid culture, gossip vloggers and the twitter stan sphere than it is the act of writing and reading RPF. There are some overlap in those worlds of course, but less so than you think they would.

This attitude is tapping into a misunderstanding that we're going to continue to run into: the vast majority of people who write and read RPF are 100% aware of the fact that what they are writing or reading is not representative of any kind of reality. Most people who are writing about Pete Wentz and Patrick Stump kissing in 2006 are under no pretenses about this being true. Opening a word doc and typing "Pete kissed Patrick's knuckles" is not the same thing as trying to find and get approved to follow private social media accounts or sending invasive questions via DM or trying to snap pictures of them in public.

Are there people who do that? Yes, and we will discuss them more in a moment. Are those people necessarily the same ones writing about Pete and Patrick kissing in 2006? I think to say that is a massive false equivalence, and misunderstanding about why people both write RPF and invade the lives of famous people. People invade the lives of famous people because they are overly and unhealthily invested in their lives.

Does writing RPF make people *more* invested in the lives of famous people? I mean. Not any more than the rest of our celebrity-obsessed culture. Instagram algorithms are basically

invented to keep you interested in other people's lives. The tabloid industry has been thriving for 100 years longer. Every ad or commercial you see is shoving a celebrity in your face. The idea that RPF will uniquely make people do this seems ill-conceived and lacking evidence.

(Also, this is going to make me sound insane, but I do need to point out there is a difference between speculating about the actual dating lives of famous people and shipping as it occurs in RPF spaces. As I said above, RPF gets written because of The Narratives, and RPF shipping is usually about going "wouldn't this make a cool story?" as opposed to going "look at this evidence I have that this is actually happening.")

Another quick one: **"It is inherently sexualizing/fetishizing, which is bad"** got the lowest vote in the poll anyway and, as I've already gone over above, lots and lots of RPF fics don't involve sex at all. If you'd like some numbers, the most used rating in AO3's Bandom tag is Teen and Up. Hockey RPF's most used rating is in fact Explicit, but its second is Teen and Up and it only has about 3k fewer fics than the explicit tag. Even a fandom like BTS, which broadly lets its freak flag fly and routinely populates some of the more out-there smut tags on AO3, has Teen and Up as its second most used rating with nearly 50,000 fics. The idea that RPF is something that is ruled only by sex and smut is transparently false.

And, again, the idea that someone's sexual fantasies about celebrities are somehow wrong and sinful and you should feel guilty about them, or the idea that sexual fantasies should never ever be shared and to do so is bad and harmful and something to both be ashamed about and shame when you see it, is literally pure sex negativity and puritanism. There is nothing wrong with creating a space (again, AWAY FROM THE PUBLIC FIGURE. OUT OF THEIR VIEW. WE WILL RETURN TO THIS LATER.) where these fantasies can be expressed; talking openly about fantasies and creating spaces where it's safe to do so is a good step towards sex positivity. If the idea of someone having fantasies or sexual thoughts about a famous person makes you uncomfortable, I really do recommend reflecting on why you feel like that.

Put a pin in fetishizing—we'll get back to it in a second. If I could do the poll again, I wouldn't have put these two together, that was a mistake.

Next, something we will address a little less briefly: **It may lead to IRL negative consequences for the subject.** I think a lot of the IRL consequences people are thinking of here are in the vein of "uncomfortable/boundary-breaking interactions with fans," and we're going to be unpacking that in depth, but let's also look at some of the other possible negative consequences people are anxious about.

Obviously, yes, large-scale rumors about a famous person can cause actual problems for them, and rumors/speculation about a famous person being in a relationship, sometimes specifically a queer relationship, can be less than ideal for their career. This seems to be a particular fear in K-pop circles, as the codes of conduct idols contractually need to follow are often so rigid that even the most chaste and hetero of dating rumors can cause problems with their bosses in addition to major backlash from their fans. And that fan backlash can get really, really ugly.

But that's about *dating rumors,* which are different from RPF (and, again, "I think these two are dating" and "I think it would be fun to think about these two dating" are two different

instincts). So let's look at it factually: *has* any K-pop idol ever had their career tanked or affected because of people writing RPF about them?

I mean. As far as I can find, no? There have been a few disastrous fallouts from dating rumors (usually for female idols, unsurprisingly—Karina from Aespa being a recent example, look into that if you want to become furious), but as for fic and shipping specifically—like, BTS is one of the largest RPF fandoms to date (over 230,000 fics on AO3 as of writing, woof), and that hasn't affected the band's career trajectory at all. They are probably the most well-known and well-recognized K-pop act worldwide, they are highly successful, they have assumedly made boatloads of cash. While there have been some ugly and homophobic attitudes towards a few of them in the media, often Jimin, those attitudes seem to come from him being "feminine" and general cultural homophobia, not from people shipping or writing fanfic about him. And, not to point out the obvious, but even with that homophobic press, Jimin is still *the hottest shit in the world.* He has a solo career, he's charted singles in multiple countries, he is probably one of the few K-pop figures that people who don't like K-pop can name. The BTS tag on AO3 doesn't seem to have affected his career at all.

Looking to the west, we see similar patterns. Looking through the names of public figures who have a lot of fic written about them—none of their *careers* have been affected by this phenomenon. The actors still get jobs, the musicians either remained successful or had totally normal career arcs and have since bowed out of the spotlight partly or altogether, the athletes are still athlete-ing. There are people in all these industries who get exiled or blacklisted for being queer or being too loud about the wrong things or just pissing the wrong people off, but none of this seems to correlate with the number of fanfics written about them. Even for e-celebrities, who are much closer to their audience than more traditional media figures, the fic does not seem to be inhibiting careers—the *audience* does, of course, and a fluctuating audience will impact someone's bottom line, but as far as I can see, no one stops getting sponsors because fans are writing about them kissing on the Internet.

It does feel like this particular side of the argument is built on scare tactics, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The idea that if someone engages with RPF they are harming the career and financial future of their fave seems to be an idea that has very little backing in reality.

The one exception I can find to the above is a 2020 incident involving actors from the 2019 Chinese live action adaptation of *The Untamed,* a situation many of you have definitely already heard about because it was a huge, huge deal. It has a Wikipedia page. It's the reason AO3 is banned in mainland China, and allegedly the reason actors Xiao Zhan and Wang Yibo either can't or don't interact in public anymore (I've seen conflicting reports on which). The TLDR (and understand that I *need* to TLDR this, going into it in-depth would take thousands more words and should 100% be left to people who understand the cultural context more) is basically "piece of explicit RPF sets off one actor's fanbase, the fanbase rallies enough to draw government attention, among other things AO3 gets banned for explicit and vulgar content, competing hate mobs proceed to try to boycott the actor and everyone he'd ever spoken to."

However, the more you look into the specifics of this whole situation, the more it becomes clear that, while a piece of RPF was the inciting incident, all the actual negative consequences came from fanmobbing, a deeply toxic social media space, a government in full reaction mode because of the pandemic, and a culture that has a lot of problems with homophobia and censorship on both the individual and systematic level (as many, many cultures do). In addition, this is a situation that happened during some of the worst parts of the COVID lockdown, when everything that happened online felt very real in a way it hasn't before or since, and everyone felt like they had much more access to celebrities because of that.

Does that make what happened okay? Certainly not, this is a completely wild situation that caused real people real harm. But to say that all the fault lies at the feet of *the existence of RPF* or even the person who wrote the RPF that sparked the situation—who, again, posted it to AO3 and is not the person who dragged it onto social media—is reductionary to the point of being incorrect. And, while this is a situation that did cause real people real harm, it is a single incident in a pool of thousands that didn't. Its existence does not cancel out those hundreds of others.

Okay, now onto the other aspect of this—RPF causing fans to act in unacceptable ways, and *that* being the thing to affect the public figure, often in the form of them, their partner, or their friends getting hate, harassment, weird messages or all of the above.

First thing is first: I am not denying that this happens, nor am I defending the people who do it. This is fucking unacceptable, shitty behavior, it often draws unwanted attention to people who have not consented to the public eye, it almost always reveals a fuck ton of ugly, misogynistic attitudes and it puts strain on real people and real relationships. Notoriously, both Jensen Ackles' and Jared Padalecki's wives dealt with pretty significant online harassment from J2 shippers, and that's only one example. There are many.

My argument isn't that this doesn't happen or isn't horrible: my argument is that this is not a phenomena unique to RPF spaces, or that comes from the RPF specifically.

This is something that happens all the time across every facet of celebrity culture, particularly in the twitter stan era. It happens constantly, and it happens just as much to people who aren't getting fanfiction written about them. I think about fans combing through Sebastian Stan's girlfriend's Instagram for a reason to cancel her, and then demanding *he* apologize for it, for instance. Everything about Taylor Swift's 2023 breakup with her long-time boyfriend and her fans declaring him abusive with no evidence and no accusation from her also jumps to mind. These are only two of hundreds and hundreds of examples of people being inappropriate about the relationships of famous people who do not have huge, dedicated RPF fandoms.

Also, this isn't even something that *only* happens to these giant celebrities with huge cults of personality. I think about what Tumblr did to John Green, for instance, or the way fandom turned on and ripped apart Rebecca Sugar, or some of the harassment that's been targeted towards Genshin voice actors. Fans in general, when given access to people they idolize, often become invasive, demanding and cruel.

All the above examples are instances of overly-entitled and overly-invested fans behaving badly. To say that overly-entitled and overly-invested fans behaving badly are features unique

to people who write and read RPF is simply false, and to say that fans who do this would simply go away if people stopped writing or reading RPF is also false. I'm sorry, but odds are that, if someone was going to send hate to the spouse or SO of a famous person they are enamored with or spending a lot of time thinking about, that person was always going to find a reason to do it.

So, can RPF lead to fan behavior that has direct and negative effects on the person it's about? Yes, of course, I would never deny that. But so does *all fan culture.* And is it possible to participate in RPF without contributing to those direct and negative effects on the person? Yes, easily. Go back to the old Bandom disclaimer I started this meta with: you keep it away from them and their loved ones, don't talk to them about it, don't send it to them or bring it to their attention. And, for the love of fuck, you don't attempt to talk to or interact with anyone's wife.

(And, I do need to point out, most people in RPF spaces follow those above rules and *don't* do any of the above shitty behavior, the same way most people who are fans of Sebastian Stan didn't go digging through some random woman's Instagram. This is, by and large, bad behavior by a few bad actors.)

Put a pin back in the "keep it contained" thing, we are going to come back to it.

Next, we're going to loop a couple together: **Issues of consent with the subject, dehumanization of the subject**, and let's toss in the earlier **fetishization** point from earlier as well because fetishizing literally means "to see as a sexual object" in this context.

The word "consent" is doing a lot of work here. For many people, the reason that RPF feels so invasive is because it feels like the writer is doing something *to* the figure without their permission. (That's why a lot of people's instinct is to simply ask the public figure if they're okay with fans writing about that—fans gain that explicit consent, and feel as if they are doing less theoretical harm by doing so. The impulse comes from a good place, though I have some thoughts about why it often does more harm than good—more on that later.)

But, here's the thing—first of all, you are not doing anything *to* a public figure by writing about them. What goes on in your head and your word document does not, like, shoot psychic harm bullets at them or something.

Secondly: public figures have, by and large, consented to the public eye. They've put themselves in front of a camera or a microphone and said "Yes, I want an audience to perceive me and my talents." That means that this person is consciously *opting in* to large groups of people thinking about them more than a normal person is thought about.

(There are, of course, people who are *non-consensually in the public eye*—two easy and contrasting examples being very young child stars whose parents put them there and high-profile criminals who are there because they got caught—but both of those are slightly different and very specific situations, would honestly take a whole other meta to unpack, and I would not be the person to write that meta—I have pretty much zero insight into the workings of true crime fandom, for instance, and have never interacted with it directly. For the sake of this argument, we are talking about people who are consensually famous.)

Agreeing to be in the public eye means that you are giving up some control of your perception to the public. You are, very literally, giving people consent to know about and think about you. There are, of course, some major downsides to this, but *people already know that*—think about every piece of media you've ever taken in with the thesis "being famous sucks." For all the advantages and opportunities it gives, it also has a lot of disadvantages. People in the public eye—actors, musicians, streamers, athletes—were, by and large, aware of these downsides and *opted in anyway.* They knew what they were getting into. In that way, they are giving up some control of their own image to the public.

So did they consent to RPF? Not specifically, but they did consent to you, the viewer, knowing and thinking about them even though they don't know you. That's part of the deal. RPF is just writing those thoughts down and sharing them. I think the anxiety around there being some violation of consent here is misplaced.

Now to address **dehumanization** and **fetishization.**

Firstly, there is obviously a greater problem in society with media, both journalistic and narrative-driven, fetishizing marginalized bodies, particularly Black, POC and trans ones. I am not denying this happens, nor am I denying that it is a serious social issue that needs to be dismantled. These greater societal narratives cause harm. You should call attention to them when you see them, you should talk about them, they should be addressed with the goal of getting rid of them.

Why do they cause harm? Because these narratives (for instance, the "sexy savage" image often imposed on Black bodies) mean that an already marginalized group of people is being viewed only as a sexual fantasy and nothing else, and this becomes the only form of engagement someone has with that group. Basically, it stops that group from being conceptualized as people and instead reduces their existence and worth to being fodder for personal sexual fantasy.

(This has been said by many other people before, but the above isn't the same thing as just, you know, finding someone who is part of a marginalized population to be sexy or appealing. That's a perfectly normal thing to be feeling. Also, if you think that the only way anyone can find, for example, a trans person hot is because they are fetishizing them, then you're actively playing into that same harmful narrative, whether you want to or not. Just something to keep in mind.)

Now let's ask: does RPF do that?

Certainly some of it does, in the way that anything created in a social context is going to reflect that social context back. There is probably a greater conversation to be had about the specific ways the Western world tends to sexualize K-pop idols, for instance, that's just one example. It's not hard to find RPF that makes you go "yikes!," the same way as it isn't hard to find a tweet or a book or a character in a movie that makes you go "yikes!"

But I would like to point something out: To objectify someone means that you engage with their appearance and perceived traits without considering their internality or desires. That's why it's bad when it happens on a systematic level—because it ignores and completely

invalidates the complexities of another person in favor of them being something that brings pleasure.

The audience does not know and, in fact, *can't* know the internality or desires of celebrities. You have no access to their thoughts and inner world; you can *only engage* with the curated persona they consented to show you. (And, sometimes, those curated personas are very much sexy and/or sexual on purpose. Let's not pretend that this is purely a game the fans play: look at the Jeremy Allen White Calvin Klein commercial, or a Scarlett Johansson photoshoot, or an ATEEZ concert, or any number of Western pop girls, Sabrina Carpenter being the most recent. The sexy isn't subtextual, friends.)

Therefore, *any engagement* with a celebrity's persona must be at least a little bit objectifying. You can *only* interact with them as a curated object in your mind, as a fetish in the academic sense—an object given allegorical meaning by a person or society.

So, yes, I do think that the flavor of objectification that occurs when thinking about or writing RPF is a different one than the greater, harmful tides of mainstream culture. It is more along the lines of acknowledging that your perception of a celebrity is a mental object totally separate from the IRL person that you can wave around and throw at walls with no consequences. It is drawing attention to the fact that picturing a celebrity doing something, or writing the words "Jensen bench presses 250 pounds" does not mean that Jensen Ackles, real life guy, is going to head off to the gym.

Is that still objectification? Yes, I don't think that's in question. Is it objectifying *in the same way* as those greater cultural narratives that cause so much harm? I think that's more complicated, and I lean more towards "not inherently, no." Not any more so than fame already objectifies the people who take part in it.

Honestly, I'm haunted by one person's response in the tags of that poll post, because they said something along the lines of "it's wrong because these people aren't your little parasocial dolls." And this has stayed with me since the moment I read it, because…well, public figures *do* turn themselves into dolls. Quite literally. You can buy dolls of K-pop idols, sports stars, YouTubers of every flavor you can imagine, musicians both current and historical. You can put them on a shelf. You can buy a bunch of Barbie clothes and dress them up in wildly unlikely outfits. You can take UFC fighter Paddy Pimblett and rapper T-Pain and smoosh their faces together to make them kiss. You can do this with real, licensed merchandise.

"What does that mean?" you ask me. Fuck me, dude, I don't really know. It gestures at a lot of stuff. I think mostly it means that, if we really want to have a conversation about the way celebrity culture objectifies and fetishizes people in the spotlight, the path to addressing it doesn't start with free, niche internet fiction which, on average, will accumulate fewer than 10k views.

And that leads up neatly into the last and, imo, the most complicated point when talking about webcreators (god, remember, this is still a meta supposed to mostly be about webcreators. I am in so fucking deep.): **Parasocial issue—it assumes a closer connection to the subject than actually exists.**

Quick review for those who don't know: As defined by the Cambridge dictionary, something parasocial "involve[s] or relate[s] to a connection between a person and someone they do not know personally." That could be a celebrity, someone you follow on social media, or even a fictional character. The important part is that there is a feeling of reciprocity in the relationship, even though it is decidedly one-sided.

Though the word "parasocial" is a fairly new one in the grand scheme of the world (coined in 1956, which is probably earlier than some of you were expecting), and people have only recently begun bringing it into the public lexicon and articulating the concept in-depth with the rise of social media, it is not a new thing, nor is it an inherently harmful one. This seems to be something people just *do*, in situations where one person knows more about another than the second can know about the first.

I say this because, in a classic example of both "the internet hates nuance" and "the internet loves to drift academic or psychology terms so they mean something slightly different," I've seen the word "parasocial" used mostly as an accusation, or *only* as a "diagnosis" for people behaving badly. So I do want to stress that this is not a term created to be a good or a bad thing; it is a term that was created to *describe a phenomenon.* People very, very often feel as if they "know" or have a relationship with public figures they cannot know personally.

There are also lots of ways parasocial relationships can be positive! They are part of the reason why representation is so important, for instance. If people, young people in particular, see figures who are like them, who they feel as if they know and have a connection with, doing positive things in the spotlight, they want to emulate that behavior. In addition, having public figures who are embraced as trustworthy means they can deliver important information better than impersonal regulatory bodies. There's a reason why certain figures and celebrities do certain PSAs; they are often picked because the demographics for that PSA trusts them. That social contract can be very helpful and is built on parasocial attitudes.

However, in the age of the internet when we all have (probably too much) access to celebrities and public figures, parasocial attitudes can get very unhealthy very fast. How so? Well, the classic example is "if someone feels like a vlogger is their friend, they might email or DM them an essay about how they feel as if they will never be loved, something the vlogger is neither ready for nor equipped to handle—and now imagine if hundreds of people are doing the same thing." This is notorious for happening in any kind of livestream chat, even for very small streamers (I have a friend who used to stream to 200 people tops and she had a mod whose only job was to deal with people who were venting about trauma).

Just in general, being very, very involved, particularly very *emotionally involved*, in the personal lives and relationships of people you don't know is unhealthy. Making a public figure your entire personality, or feeling as if that figure responsible for you feeling safe in the long term or whether or not you have a good or bad day, is unhealthy. Feeling as if you have some kind of say or ownership over what a figure does and doesn't do because you "know" them is obviously unhealthy.

But, as with anything, there's always nuance. There's also nothing inherently wrong with having a creator who calms you down or soothes you when you're having a bad day. There's nothing inherently wrong with enjoying content from two people whose relationship you find

cute or funny or aspirational. If a public figure you looked up to turns out to not be who they said they were, it's normal to feel upset and betrayed.

And also, notably, the parasocial relationship is part of the reason some of this content is fun. Most lifestyle content is only interesting and engaging because the audience cares about the creator as a person, and therefore wants to see their lifestyle. The creator is playing into that bond, oftentimes specifically cultivating it, as part of their brand and content.

When does it become unhealthy? When the viewer, the person feeling the parasocial relationship, *forgets that it isn't real.* When they start to buy into that illusion, feel as if there is some kind of reciprocity to the connection they feel, or substitute what they're feeling and their perception of a figure for what's going on in reality. Or—and this is an important one—they make those thoughts and feelings the public figure's problem.

Notably, particularly in the world of social media celebrities, influencers and content creators, this can go both ways. It isn't hard to find these examples of public figures putting too much on their audience or using their audience as a way to get the positive feedback they need, and it also isn't hard to find public figures talking about how it can be very difficult to not hang their whole sense of self worth on the like/dislike ratio. Parasocial feelings and boundaries are something that needs to be managed on all sides.

Happily, because we now have the words and lexicon to talk about it, people have gotten much better at doing just that—we love the human ability to Put Words To Things.

Parasocial relationships have existed for as at least as long as there has been mass media. Some scholars would say they've existed for even longer, and use the word "parasocial" to describe relationships people have with gods, ghosts, and fictional characters. We have needed to start talking about them more in the past 20 years because there are a lot more mass media figures, the definition of what counts as a mass media figure have broadened, and people have more access to public figures—both talking to them directly and literally seeing more of their "private lives" via Instagram—than any other time in history.

So now that we've established what a parasocial relationship is, how does that relate to RPF?

The thought process here is that assuming you know a person enough to write about what's going on in their minds, or write out the actions they would take in any given situation, is something that is negatively parasocial. It is assuming that you know them and their inner world enough to do that.

There also seems to be the perception that, if a person writes about a figure, their mental version of the figure will begin to overtake the "real" version and they will act badly if the figure behaves in a way that's different than they "should." The idea is that this heightens the sense of parasocial ownership that these people feel over a public figure.

I can definitely see the throughline here, for sure, particularly in the first point. Certainly it can feel presumptuous to write the thoughts and reactions of a real person, even (or maybe in particular) a real person you have observed the behaviors of deeply. That instinct, that you can somehow know and understand the inner world of someone you've never met, could accurately be described as parasocial, yes.

But let's back up a second and review: when do parasocial relationships become harmful? When the person feeling them forgets what they're feeling is an illusion and not reality, that they are interacting with a curated persona they have no real access to, when they make those feelings somehow intrinsically tied to their sense of self, and when they make it the public figure's problem.

Here, I need to point out something that's going to seem really obvious: the majority of people who write fiction are aware that they *are not writing about reality.* They know that they are not engaging with or creating something that is literally true. (There are expectations to this, of course, be that from age, an altered perception of reality, or certain spiritual beliefs. However, we are going to put those aside as fringe cases for the sake of this argument.)

I don't know if that awareness of non-reality is as universal a mindset of people who, as an example, run "update" or positivity accounts on twitter, or tag a creator often on social media platforms, or vie for attention in chats or comment sections. Those are much more performatively familiar actions, as opposed to writing fiction, which in many ways is an act of *distancing.* It is, as above-explained, drawing attention to how fake and not real the version of the person inside your own head is.

Therefore, writing fiction about a public figure, while absolutely engaging in parasocial elements, seems less *harmfully parasocial* than a lot of other more "standard" fan behavior because it is not only aware, but in fact draws active attention to, the "fourth wall." It is a fantasy that is aware that it's a fantasy, which is always more healthy than a fantasy that is viewed as reality.

I would like to take this moment to gently point out that feeling the need to somehow protect famous people against the idle fantasies of random nobodies on the internet who will never interact with them in a meaningful way is *also* deeply parasocial. Obsessively asking someone what They Are Okay With and for incredibly specific boundaries and then acting like it's your job to enforce that as law, for that person's comfort, in spaces where that person *isn't,* is parasocial. And, while the idea of enforcing *someone else's boundaries* is already a flawed one (with a few specific exceptions usually involving partners or family, boundaries are something the person who sets them enforces), trying to enforce the boundaries of someone you *do not personally know* is basically the definition of parasocial behavior. No one is reducing the overall parasocial environment by doing this.

Sometimes, I think that on a very abstract level—very, very abstract, go with me here for a second—another part of the problem people have with RPF is that it draws dizzying attention to the fact that self, as presented to the other, *is a construct,* so much so that it causes a knee-jerk, nearly dysphoric reaction in some people. It is strange and uncomfortable to realize that it is very possible to *accurately write* another real human without any access to their inner world, or at least write something that is very recognizably in their voice. Our brains don't like the idea that it's as easy to mimic a person's personality and voice as it is a character in a movie.

(For the record, MCYT fic ((fuck, god, remember, this is about MCYT fic, help me god)) is fantastic at this—you can very much tell that writers have spent a lot of time listening to the way these people speak, and they can mimic that with crystal clear accuracy.)

And I just went through hundreds of words outlining the "whys" for RPF being uncomfortable but, honestly, I think that many people also don't even think about it that deeply. A lot of reasoning as to why RPF is Trademark Bad seems to start and end at "Well, I wouldn't want anyone to do that to me," which—I'm sorry, friends, but that's bad logic and a bad argument. Firstly, I doubt anyone reading this lives a comparable life to the people who are getting RPF written about them. You are, more likely than not, a private citizen not in the public eye and therefore, yeah, it would probably be weird and distressing to discover that strangers on the internet were writing about you. But these figures, as we have just established, *have.* It's a different world and a different issue.

It's also impossible to say that, just because something would make *you* upset, it would make *everyone else in the world* equally upset. For instance, *I* wouldn't want to be fed a raw tomato and, in fact, would consider someone insisting I eat one to be a sensory torture crime against my person, but that is not a universal tomato experience, or even the standard one. Meanwhile, I also wouldn't mind at all if someone used my name and likeness is a story, for all I very much would not want to be a public figure.

My point here is that it's impossible to say that every single person who has ever had RPF written about them hates it. In fact, just from a pure numbers game, and just from how weird a person needs to be to become a public figure to begin with, there are almost certainly people who genuinely like it and think it's fun and creative. There are tons of people in this world and almost no experience is universal. I suspect we hear a lot more about the people who hate it because creators who like it are also savvy enough to know that staying out of those kinds of fan spaces publicly is now accepted as a really important way for those creators to maintain the parasocial boundary for everyone.

Basically, just because *you* wouldn't like something doesn't automatically mean *everyone* wouldn't like it.

(I will also say that this is very close to the rhetoric that allows kink/sex-negative and anti-queer agendas to flourish. The "I don't like it so that means that every other person in the world must also not like it and it must be bad" voice is the devil talking and you need to learn to resist it.)

[deep, shuddering breath.] So why did I just take you through all of that? Well, firstly because I feel very strongly that RPF is not any more bizarre than, or even that illogical in the face of, general celebrity culture, particularly one where mass media has been gleefully using shipping language ("Bennifer," "Bradjelina") for decades, a Hollywood landscape filled with biopics, and long-form journalism and documentaries framing epic championship wins as the result of the Transcendent Bond Between Teammates. And I do think we should maybe be a bit more critical about how this kind of behavior only becomes hyper-demonized when it moves to a space where it is A) not making any money; B) engaged with mostly by women and queer people; and C) often engaging with queer themes and relationships. Hollywood can make four full-length movies about the Beatles that will all undoubtedly be riddled with exaggerations and inaccuracies (as it has to be, in order to make it a good story) and will make more money than an of us will ever see, but as soon as a 19-year-old girl on the internet writes something about two Beatles kissing and posts it for free, that's something people want to get up in arms over. I think that's an attitude worth being aware of and unpacking.

But also, I wanted to really lay out how most RPF spaces live and die by **Persona, Not Person.** This is so much the norm that it's the default, particularly how this rule saves people from a lot of angst and awkwardness, and how unaware people outside these spaces are of this rule. RPF isn't about pushing into a public figure's life, it's about being *very aware of the fourth wall* and then having fun from the safety of being behind it. There will always be a separation between what a famous person shows the world and what that person's reality is, and *that's okay.* That's the point. We know celebrities *only* as personas.

During my research for this meta, the one attitude I encountered again and again from people outside of RPF spaces and communities was that people who write RPF are under the impression that what they're writing is real, or even that they *want it to be real.* And that isn't true. Someone who is speculating the real-life relationships of famous people is probably going to be on twitter, or on gossip forums, not posting archive-locked fics to AO3. These people are going to be having *a lot more fun* on twitter. In my experience, people in RPF communities who talk about what they're writing being Trademark Real get called "tinfoil hats" or "truthers" and are generally discouraged. Does that mean it doesn't happen? Of course not. But that *isn't the norm.* RPF writers know, oftentimes better than anyone, that they are writing about a fantasy.

I've also mentioned the fourth wall a few times, and I've put a pin in such statements as "these works should only exist in places where the public figures aren't." We are circling back to that now.

Here is one of the Hard Learned Lessons of the RPF space:

Part VI: The Fourth Wall Is God/Keeping Containment

I've said this before and I will repeat it: writing and posting RPF is gremlin4gremlin behavior, and it needs to never leave the gremlin spaces. This is for everyone's sake, sanity, and health. One of the most important rules for keeping RPF fun is being aware of the fact that RPF is also a weird thing to do and that people who understandably never want to be around it don't ever have to be.

"But, author," you cry out to me, "didn't you just spend approximately 7,000 words explaining to me why RPF *isn't* weird?"

"Ah! A common misconception, dear reader!" I respond. "No, I just spent approximately 7,000 words explaining to you why RPF is not something inherently immoral, dangerous, or harmful. Rest assured, RPF is indeed weird. It's super weird and it isn't for everyone."

And before you get outraged at me, consider this: you know what else is super weird? Historical military reenactment. Historical military reenactment is incredibly weird and not for everyone and not everyone gets it. I have no idea why someone would want to spend a weekend accurately recreating the Battle of Gettysburg, and I'm fairly sure that's a pretty common opinion.

How do both the historical reenactors and the general public deal with this? Well, the reenactors keep the hobby contained to specified events and don't go to work dressed as a Union soldier, and the general public doesn't attend those events. Easy peasy.

We can name dozens of similar situations. Hobby taxidermists. Furries. People who listen to black box plane crash audio. Any number of kink lifestyles. Speedrunners of obscure and broken N64 games. Cave divers. The world is filled with people who find profoundly weird things fun and/or enriching and happily take part in them *within the designated spaces for these things.*

(TBH, another similar situation is fanfic and fan culture in general. Like, this is one of the weirdo hobbies for weirdos.)

Honestly, I think this is something that should be true for *all* fandom spaces—the fact that fandom in general has migrated to twitter makes my teeth hurt to this day and has, in my opinion, been a net loss for fandom culture. But the fact that people talk about RPF on twitter (or post RPF on twitter) makes me want to vanish into the sea forever. Like, that's the normie site. That's where celebrities and journalists and the people who bullied you in high school are. Get thee back to the gremlin spaces, it makes everything so much better.

In all seriousness, the real downside of twitter, other than all the user-function things I personally think make twitter a nightmare for fandom stuff (non-chronological, no way to organize things, horrible for stable links, tiny little word limit, seriously how did anyone find that website usable even before the whole X thing) is this: *everyone is on twitter.* The everyone on twitter includes the people who create the things that spark fandom, no matter what that may be. And fans need dedicated and fan-only spaces where they can be joyful little gremlins the way a neurotic husky needs adequate enrichment. The consequences for not having that are, honestly, pretty analogous to that bored and under-stimulated husky—a giant mess, unforeseen destruction, probably some biting, and many regrets.

This is true for all fandoms honestly. If I'm having a whole-ass moment about how much I want to see Luke Skywalker make out with Han Solo, I don't want Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, or fucking Dave Filoni to see it and know about it and think about it. I don't want Leigh Bardugo to know about my unhinged Shadow and Bone AU. Repeat after me: It's Not For Them. This is something that genuinely seems to have gotten lost somewhere in the last couple of years: fandom in general is not for the creators—it's for the fans.

That's what the fourth wall is for. It separates fans from non-fans. I'm not saying that these worlds should *never* touch—this isn't a "keep all fandom off twitter always" argument—but it does mean that there is specific content and behavior that probably should stay away from where creators can see it. Yes, RPF is one of them, but honestly so is ship discourse for basically any piece of fiction. So is most NSFW fanart. So is really gushing over how hot you think a celebrity is and getting really specific as to why. As the trajectories of many, many shows and movie franchises have unfortunately proven to us, so is *speculation about what's going to happen next in a story.*

That fan-only place used to be tumblr (many people including me are still on tumblr, but it's not the default gathering place of fandom the way it was a decade ago). Before that, that place was livejournal, geocities sites, listservs, forums. Now, for many people in fandom, the only place left is twitter (and private discord servers, but those are different from a general open-forum social media space). And, yes, I think that's weakened the fourth wall to the detriment of everyone.

The loss of that dedicated fan space means that fans are now constantly aware that creators can See Them and Judge Them. Now, it is 100% possible, even likely, for a creator to just stumble upon an RPF thread, because that's just how the algorithm works (same with TikTok but I am admittedly a fucking dinosaur about TikTok and have no idea how it works. I've also refused to learn because I hate shortform videos. So.).

Meanwhile, the DEFAULT ASSUMPTION used to be that, if a public figure found RPF of themself, it was because they went looking for it or someone was being a real asshole and sending it to them. Again, I point you back to the old standard disclaimer I started this meta with: "if you found this by googling your name or the name of someone you know, hit the back button, this is not for you." "Hit the back button" was as far as it went.

But the idea that fan content made in fan spaces is very much not for the creators has eroded. It's eroded across all fandoms, but in no place is that erosion more obvious than in video creator RPF spaces. When I first started skimming DSMP fic, right as my interest was being sparked, I didn't see that disclaimer. Instead, I saw a new one:

> "If any of these creators say they're uncomfortable with this content, I will take it down."

WHAT a change in vibe, right? I find this cultural shift fascinating, because it illustrates this difference. It implies that creators *should* be aware at all about the RPF being written about them, and that it in fact *shouldn't be written at all* if they don't approve of the idea. It is asking creators for a thumbs up on fan content that everyone used to take for granted they would never see.

It's assuming that the fourth wall is gone. It's nearly embracing the fact that it's gone. And it's not a healthy or sustainable way to approach fandom for anyone.

Yes, I've just spent thousands of words defending RPF's existence, and I will stand by every one of those words. But I will *also* stand by the statement that the way to engage in RPF in a way that is safe and fun is from behind the fourth wall. Everyone needs to keep the RPF very, very far away from the figures portrayed therein—speaking from experience, the RPF fandoms that have the least amount of creator-fan drama are the ones where everyone fully embraces that the fic and the Real People exist in totally different worlds that never touch (mostly sports RPF spaces, which have their own drama separate from that).

Now, you also might remember that, a little while ago, I mentioned creators who are "savvy enough to stay out of those fan spaces." I say that because this fourth wall boundary needs to be something maintained from both sides of the fourth wall. Just like it's the fans' job to keep RPF out of spaces where the creators can see, it's these creators' job to not go into these spaces and then act appalled by what they see there. It's their job to not go looking for it and not try to thought police their fanbase about it. Sure, okay, put out a tweet that winks and smiles towards that content if that's what you're comfortable with, but. Fan spaces are *for fans* for a reason. Creators need to respect that and stay out.

(And, if they don't, they need to go in totally incognito and then pretend they know nothing about it. I am positive that there are people who do this but that is their business, not mine.)

Honestly, the first really bad and destructive fourth wall break moment I remember seeing myself came from the creator's side, not the fans. It was the fucking Channel Awesome crew, if you can believe it (back in the day when a lot of them were doing intersecting plots and terrible movies, they did in fact hit about 3 of my Getting RPF Criteria. God I've been on the internet for too long). During one of their group shoots, someone went into a fan-only anon meme on livejournal, found an (honestly really innocuous) little h/c cuddling scene, and had the two people portrayed therein act out the drabble while someone else read the narration.

I will never forget seeing that anon come back on to the meme and respond to their own drabble, just. unspeakably upset that this had happened. Humiliated by a group of people they looked up to, who used their work without their consent. And, most of all, concerned that a creator had come into this space where creators were Not Supposed To Be and done something like this. That moment really colored the way I viewed RPF (and, honestly, one creator in particular who I'm not going to name) ever since.

The Fourth Wall Is God, and both sides need to respect it. Everyone needs to do their part in keeping this healthy and safe. To do that, all the creators have to do is not go looking for it.

This is why I hate any kind of "public figures read fanfic about them" segment. Honestly, I could write a whole other essay about why I hate those specifically unless the fic is consensually submitted by the person who wrote it (the top reason being that they're nearly always punching down, nearly always punching at a teenager who looks up to them, and nearly always result in that poor teenager getting loads of harassment), but I don't really think I need to go into that right now. I will just say this: **once someone opens the fanfic box, *it is very difficult to close it.*** And doing so is inviting bad boundaries from fans.

If someone is reading fanfic publicly, there are going to be people who take that as a sign that they can *send them* fanfic publicly and, honestly,I can't even get that mad at the logic there. Then people are going to feel like they can ask the figure about it, or ask about things related to it, and that probably leads to a lot of invasive questions and content the figure understandably does not want to answer or deal with and then, look at that, we are getting on that "negative consequences for the figure" thing we just broke down in depth, and no one is having a good time.

Basically: keep the fanfic box closed on both sides for everyone's safety and sanity, maintaining good creator-audience boundaries is a two-way street, and the creator also needs to make good choices about it. If that's maintained on all sides, general peace is kept.

The one thing I want you to take from this section is, in my opinion, the golden rule of RPF: Good fences make good neighbors. The Fourth Wall Is God. Respect it and everyone has a good time.

Part V: But what about Dan and Phil?

This is what people always say, right? This is the example it all comes back to. This is everyone's favorite go-to about how RPF is destructive and bad and how the people who do it cause actual harm.

For those who don't know, I will try to summarize this as quickly and succinctly as possible. Dan [Howell] and Phil [Lester] are internet creators who came up in the first big youtube vlog boom, in the very early 2010s. They made a blend of lifestyle, comedy, and storytime content, with some skits thrown in for flavor. They were (and, to the best of my knowledge, still are) best friends and roommates, and there has always been a lot of speculation as to their sexualities and the nature of their relationship. At the height of their fame, they were some of the most recognizable names of the platform, they had book deals and merch in department stores, they had a weekly show on BBC Radio 1. And they were just as notorious for the fandom around them and shipping them as they were for any and all of that.

(Will also note here that, at this point, both of these men have since come out as gay, but have still been mum about the exact nature of their relationship, as is their right.) [Edit Oct. 13 2025: in the funniest turn of events possible, it took me so long to write this meta that the previous statement is no longer true. Happy 16 years of functional relationship to Dan and Phil, thank you for that video, I now need to add/rewrite a bunch of stuff that comes after this statement. Oh my god.]

The TLDR of the whole situation, which many of you certainly already know about, is that there was a lot of boundary-breaking and privacy-invading behavior from their fans, all in the name of the #phan shipping. These men were stalked. People dug into information they totally shouldn't have. And, yeah, in a lot of ways this is the blueprint for how parasocial and destructive fan-creator relationships, fandom, and RPS can get.

All of that is true and, just like before, I'm not denying any of it or saying it's okay. Don't stalk people. Don't dig into creators's private lives.

But I am going to say this: Dan and Phil *always* had bad boundaries with their audience. Right from the start. The way those two met was kind of an instance of weird creator-audience boundaries (Phil made videos Dan liked and Dan reached out to him). They did shit like making a deal with a UK SIM card provider so that random fans might maybe get calls and texts from them. Their most popular series were Q&A videos where they interacted directly with their audience.

Again, this was right at the start of the vlog boom. No one had heard of an influencer yet. "Parasocial" was not in anyone's vocabulary

And I am in no way saying that the situation was *their fault* (being stalked is never the person being stalked's fault), but I *am* saying that they there was a lot of audience mismanagement and instances where they leaned into things they really shouldn't have because drawing hard lines in the sand and shutting things down would have been more healthy for everyone. But they had no way of knowing that because this was a very young platform and type of celebrity at the time. And you know what!!!! As of their Oct. 2025 video where they confirmed their relationship, *they say the same thing. They agree with this point.*

They were entrenched in their own fandom space in a way that was not at all healthy, and have never really seemed comfortable with thinking about themselves as public figures. Over and over again, they played into this "are they-aren't they" narrative—videos where Phil gets tied up in Dan's bed, a running bit where Phil asked his audience to send him drawings of

him artistically nude—in a way that absolutely no one would advise now, because we went through situations like this and saw the effect is had on audience and creators.

So again, understand that I'm not trying to victim blame when I say that, instead of being held up as What Happens When People Do RPF, this is something that should be looked at as what happens when everyone accidentally douses a fire with cooking oil because they think any liquid will put out the flames. This is a situation where two people on a new platform made all the exact wrong choices so no one else would make them afterward.

I'll repeat the same thing I said about the Xiao Zhan situation above. This is one situation among thousands where this *didn't* happen. This was a fandom in every way set up for failure and awkwardness and The Horrors, but it's not emblematic of RPF as a concept.

And, listen—in a broader sense, is there RPF that I can only describe as "in bad taste" or "problematic?" Yes, of course there is. Is there RPF that makes me uncomfortable, and that I grimace at as I scroll through tags? There sure is! But you also run into both those things in *any* fandom context, because fandom takes place in and reflects back a broader culture littered with bad actors, systemic issues, inequalities, and bias. You'll also find these things in any subculture or corner of the internet. You are just as likely to find someone talking inappropriately about a teenager, or saying a bunch of racist bullshit, or being overly sympathetic to a mass murderer, in the comments of a web comic, recipe blogs, historical forum discussion posts, or r/fiberarts as you are in an RPF tag.

Do these things draw attention to conversations we should be having and issues/biases we should be addressing and working to dismantle? Of course they do. But they are not somehow more endemic of, or a symptom of, RPF than they are anything else.

And finally, I want to address that a lot of people are uncomfortable with RPF simply because they think it's something *freaks* do, and they don't want the freaks around. This is the rallying call of all antis everywhere—"why can't everyone just be *normal?"* Can't we just be normal about celebrities?

Honestly, my answer to that question? No, I don't think we can be. I think every facet of human history proves that, and, though it's gotten worse since technology gave us photos and then TV and then the internet and then social media, it didn't start there. I think Shakespere wrote plays about Cleopatra and Richard III. I think that Catholics have prayed to the relics of saints, and people have bought and sold those relics, for almost as long as Catholicism has been around. I think that, in 1832, Horatio Greenough made a sculpture of George Washington, human being, in the image of the Greek god Zeus. I think about over 100 years of tabloid journalism. I think about our still-voracious appetite for Marilyn Monroe. I think about every child-star crash out and "where are they now?" segment. I think about how people watch hours-long breakdowns of scandals and drama about public figures they've never heard of. I think about the few online creators I've followed for over a decade and how, yes, in a corner of my mind I know is irrational and need to consciously override, I do feel like I know them insomuch as I feel like I have insight about how they think. I know it isn't true, but that doesn't mean I don't still feel it.

No, I don't think we can be normal about celebrities. And, I think, at least RPF is honest about the fantasy of it all.

God. Okay. Alright. Holy fuck, I think that's the last thing I wanted to say in this "short and concise" intro. Fuck me, man. Anyway. Next slide (chapter).

Chapter 2: HEY, REMEMBER HOW THIS META WAS ABOUT THE DSMP?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

HEY, REMEMBER HOW THIS META WAS ABOUT THE DSMP?

ACTUALLY GETTING TO THAT: WHAT THE FUCK DO THOSE LETTERS MEAN?

This is a meta about Minecraft fanfiction.

…I'm. Going to assume you know what Minecraft is? Fuck, uhh, if you don't, Minecraft is a sandbox video game where everything is cube and you build like with Legos. Sometimes there are monsters that will try to kill you. Kids go batshit bananas for it but it's a pretty all-ages experience. Fuck man, if you need more context about Minecraft here is a link to the Wikipedia entry on Minecraft, that will honestly do a better job explaining than I can.

As for the acronym: SMP stands for Survival Multiplayer. I am saying this upfront because personally I was unaware of that piece of information until April of 2024. The acronym was everywhere and I was simply too afraid to ask. My best guess was "several Minecraft people."

You'll see it all the time. It's just shorthand for "multiple people are playing the game and they are playing the game mode where dying and losing your inventory is possible" and has become a general video game creator term. There are many SMPs.

MCYT stands for Minecraft YouTube, a broad category that has expanded to include most kinds of Minecraft video content, including streamers.

The D, in this instance, stands for Dream, or DreamWasTaken, which is the most common psudonym for a video game/Minecraft content creator who started the particular SMP which will take up much of our discussion.

"Why are you starting with this 'DSMP'?," you ask me. "Did MCYT fic not exist before then?", you ask me.

No, no, it did. But before the huge DSMP fic boom of the pandemic era, that fic behaved in a similar way to all the other RPF fandoms I've ever interacted with. If there are two or more creators interacting with each other and they start to hit the RPF points I mentioned above, fic got written. There has been fanfiction about Minecraft creators basically for as long as there have been Minecraft creators who interacted with each other. Name an early multi-channel-network or multi-persona channel, there's probably at least a few fics written about them. There's fic for The Yogscast, there's fic for Team Crafted (granted not *that* much of it, though some may have been purged after several of the creators turned out to be various flavors of predators) (we will find this to be an unfortunate recurring theme), I keep mentioning

Achievement Hunter which was very much its own fandom but also deep enough in the Minecraft sphere in the 2010s that is probably counts.

One of the grand traditions in these fics was to take situations that the creators got into which were 100% played for laughs and then reinterpret them as something more serious. That was the grand tradition, and it makes perfect sense if you look at what fanfic likes to do—it often takes moments that are brushed over or not explored in the "canon" material and goes "free real estate."

To go back to Achievement Hunter for a moment and expand on something I mentioned before, because I'm most familiar with that: one of the most popular types of fic back in the day was to take their Minecraft "Kings Tournament" Lets Plays, wherein one person was the "king" and created/set up a bunch of mini games and everyone else played through them and then the one at the end with the most points became king next time, and play them as drama instead of comedy. Those videos only have "plot" insomuch as anything with a sequential series of events can be read as having a "plot"—the plot is that five guys are all going after the same goal and one of them wins it, but no one is, like, considering Character Motivation.

Of course, what if we did? What if we did imagine this as a political drama, maybe a low fantasy one, which was particularly appealing in 2014 when Game of Thrones was front and center in the cultural zeitgeist?

Perfect fic fodder, basically. You're given the basic outline and plot beats and the vibes of the people living through them. Now all you need to do is add feelings and interpersonal relationships and make it dramatic. People did the same thing with Achievement Hunter's GTA heist videos. And a lot of these fics are *fantastic*. (And have sadly since been purged since Ryan Haywood turned out to be a scumbag. Again, unfortunate recurring theme.) That was one of the most popular conceits of RPF in this space. There were other concepts too, of course (a fandom space is not a fandom space unless someone writes some high school/college and coffee shop AUs), but this is one thread you can follow consistently through the majority of them.

And even creators who would later become entrenched in DSMP had fic, *popular* fic, before everything else about the DSMP really took off, most of it focusing on Dream and his frequent collaborators, often shipping him and one of those collaborators named George (if you see "DNF" in this space, it does not stand for "did not finish" —I made this mistake, I was profoundly confused—but "DreamNotFound," the name of the ship) and their circle. Most of the early popular fic focused on those dynamics, often doing just what I outlined above—taking ideas of a "manhunt" and playing them more straight and dramatic rather than silly and goofy.

The fic generally behaved the way one would expect it to. Until, quite suddenly, it really, really didn't.

I am focusing on DSMP not only because it was unprecedentedly popular, but also because it marks a seismic change in the way people talk about and conceptualize this kind of fic.

That change was, as I said way back at the start: **the DSMP fandom insists that they are not writing RPF.** Many writers in the fandom are actually *really* insistent on this, and don't

like when it's questioned. If you go into the tag, you will actually find a fair amount of commentary about how RPF is morally wrong and/or makes them uncomfortable.

Those of you unfamiliar with the fandom space are staring at me and saying "Wait, huh? What?" Make no mistake, this was also my first reaction, when I started skimming fic in October of 2024. That is what started this whole meta. That's what we're here to unpack. There's logic to it. There's reasoning.

(One last sidenote! As many of you doubtlessly already know and as I already alluded to, various people who have already come up and are going to come up from here on out have since been revealed to be various flavors of assholes, bad actors, and all around people you might not want to support. I will not be getting into or breaking down any of these accusations in depth because, quite frankly, I'm not the right person to do it, other people have already done it better, it doesn't have all that much bearing on the subject I am handling, and also fucking look at my word count, please don't make me add several thousand more words to it documenting anything else, particularly anything that requires the care and depth that these accusations and actions deserve. I will say that the one most relevant to this discussion is William Gold [Wilbur Soot,] who was central to the project and fandom and is certainly a domestic abuser.

Basically, any positive statements I make about these people's work does not reflect on what I think about them as people, and I managed to do 99% of my research for this project with archive footage or through the footage of less objectionable parties so as not to give said assholes and bad actors clicks.)

So, okay. We still haven't answered the question. What *is* the Dream SMP?

The DreamSMP is something that started off as a pretty standard "content creator friends fuck around and make videos together in a Minecraft server" setup, originally launched in late April of 2020 as a way to check out features in a new game update. Over the next months, more people joined and it eventually evolved into a semi-scripted roleplay epic involving at least a dozen intersecting storylines with open-source worldbuilding and fan-sourced character designs, music and animation. It also quickly became one of the most popular things in the world.

In every way, it was a perfect storm. It was the right creators and the right concept at the right time.

Creators-wise, the cast struck the perfect balance between personalities who were already very popular (two most prominent of those probably being the titular Dream, who very suddenly found himself as one of the most popular video game creators on YouTube with his manhunt videos; and Technoblade, who was already a recognizable name in the Minecraft space and then skyrocketed to mega-popularity in 2019 via completely breaking a general e-celeb tournament called Minecraft Mondays and fleecing Keemstar—yes, *that* Keemstar, I also can't believe he's a footnote in this saga—of a lot of money. Those two also played up a rivalry at one point which upped both of their reach even more); personalities who had smaller and well-established fanbases, though not any kind mainstream recognition; and exciting, totally new up-and-coming personalities who were quickly gaining traction and who

new viewers could now discover (many of them very young, so the voices were literally fresh and new).

Timing-wise, it's impossible to separate DSMP's popularity from the pandemic. The first real "arc"/story event took place in the fall of 2020. To refresh your memory, those were the *dog days* of COVID for many people. Everything has been remote for months and the vaccine seems like a pipedream. No one has been outside or among friends in forever. Days are getting shorter, it's getting colder, and it feels like this is never going to end. Structures are gone, particularly for the main audience of most of these streamers, who can best be described as "young." On the older side, maybe 18-22. On the youngest side, middle schoolers. Median age probably 15 or 16ish.

So not only is everyone quarantined with a lot of time to dedicate to watching streamers in general, the streams themselves offered a way to recreate that lost stability. Different creators go live at different times. People can go from stream to stream and find community and meaning, put together clues and continuity, figure out secrets and motivations. Days don't need to be long long seasons of anxiety, nothingness, and remote schools/work you can't pay proper attention to. The DSMP got an incredibly dedicated audience and community simply by being something that gave a solid routine to a time where it felt like none existed.

And, story-wise, it ended up telling a story that felt very resonant, too.

To begin to address that issue, first: what do I mean by "semi-scripted"?

Basically, these creators use Minecraft the same way very produced D&D podcasts use the 5e system. There were some story beats that were outlined the way a DM might outline an encounter but, instead of leaving the results up to dice rolls, they left them up to Minecraft mechanics and gameplay. Certain events were more or less scripted and planned, depending on the creator and the context (my understanding is that, by the end, some people were beat-for-beat outlining scenes even if they weren't writing full lines for everyone), and the majority of them still included at least some element of improv.

A few creators added more fully scripted or written-out parts of the story, but those were usually either presented like "cutscenes," or delivered via non-Minecraft means (reading something on stream, posting a story, etc.).

So you see how this is different from what had been done in the past. Rather than very informal "yes, and"-ing being rewritten as something more serious by fans, the DSMP was actually trying to tell a serious story.

That story is hard to summarize, because it's very long, very involved, has a lot of moving parts, and—at this point in time—is one of the single most inaccessible pieces of popular media I've ever tried to comb through (and I've combed through inaccessible media such as defunct early 2010's ARGs, purposely obtuse hyperlink stories, *House of Leaves, Pale Fire*, and Homestuck). There are also frustratingly few good recaps, and the popular recaps are all videos with a lot of editorializing which I did not want, I wanted text recaps that just presented the order of events. Shout out to this person who was able to basically give me that, your work was invaluable to this project.

There is also the issue where, by design, you can pick a streamer POV and get a different story. This “pick-your-own-protag” element is a feature, not a bug, but it does make a straightforward “okay, so what is this about?” paragraph difficult.

However, I do want to attempt to give some kind of plot summary for people who are not familiar with this story. I MUST pick a POV to do this with any kind of brevity, so here’s an attempt to do so, picking one that intersects with a lot of the others and introduces many of the core themes:

Broadly, the DSMP’s narrative centers around a revolution and the quest of a city for independence, and then the extended and excessive fallout from that conflict. On a more thematic level, it’s a narrative about power, what people do with power, how it changes people, and how different people navigate it from both the top and the bottom.

One way to view the story is with Tommyinnit and Tubbo as paralleled characters both trying to survive a world which is constantly hostile to them. Tubbo struggles to navigate the power structures of different styles of government, from democracy to authoritarianism, all of which manipulate and use him; Tommyinnit muddles through modes of unstructured power, including anarchist and Darwinian viewpoints, all of which harm him. Within this, Wilbur Soot plays the voice of corrupted revolutionary values, an idealist whose sanity snaps when that perfect idealistic vision falls apart; Technoblade plays the voice of a battleworn cynic who trusts no system except the power needed to ensure personal freedom; and Dream plays the embodiment of power itself, an always-looming threat whose main goal is to reestablish an order that, in his eyes, never should have been trifled with in the first place.

Now, listen, I am aware that many of you who are familiar with this media just got mad at me for framing Tommy and Tubbo as protagonists at all, and that is fair. As I said, the fact that you can pick a different streamer—and there are over 30 who took part in this world—and experience a narrative that looks either slightly different or radically different to what I just outlined is a feature and not a bug. Every creator added their own elements and dimensions to the storyline, you could follow the story based on every one of them, and by design Technoblade’s story looks different than Wilbur’s looks different than Nihachu/Niki’s looks different than everyone else’s. I picked the above POV specifically to center because it’s the one that gets across those themes of power the easiest, and I do think that is the core of the DSMP’s story.

Because, even though summarizing every single person’s plot and everything that happens in all of them would take thousands and thousands of words and I am not the correct person to try to do it, the majority of those other plotlines also play into these themes of power to the point where it really does feel shockingly cohesive. Quackity gains political power at the cost of personal power, then takes back both of those things and makes a lot of bloody choices to ensure he won’t lose either again. Awesamdude/Sam comes into something that gives him power (a prison) and every choice he makes after that is centered around what lets him keep it (that prison being inescapable). Niki comes to the realization that she’s been powerless in the narrative up to this point and decides to start setting things on fire. There are two whole plots about mind control which, yeah, mind control plots are about power (that’s also a lot of mind control plots for any story to have, frankly). It tracks incredibly neatly, and you see why

this was a compelling direction—yeah, in 2020 I was also having a lot of big thoughts and feelings about What Power Does.

Meanwhile, if you are new to this story but familiar with RPF as I have outlined above, you are probably gaping at all this and asking, "Hey. How much of that is, like, on purpose?"

Um. Well. I'm not sure? Hard to say. I'd estimate it's probably 60-40 intentional-unintentional ratio if we're being ungenerous, maybe 80-20 if we're being very generous? A lot of this is 100% played serious and straight and many of the streamers are much better actors than you'd expect, and certainly most people involved are telling a story on purpose. But also a lot of this is pants-on-fire RP and quick reactions to unexpected events. I have no idea if these creators really sat down and discussed what themes they wanted to dig into and why, and even if they did I doubt they framed it as "hey, do you want to parallel your character's corruption in the face of power with my character's corruption in the face of power?" Honestly, a really cool out-of-character thing about this project is that you watch a few of the participants fall in love with dramatic storytelling live on camera.

Much of it is clumsy and not fully thought through, and the story as a *story* has the big problem of never really indicating to the viewer what to *do* with any of the ideas it plays with, or bringing them to a satisfying conclusion, because it just kind of…ends, very abruptly in most cases. This is partly because of, from my understanding, several behind-the-scenes falling outs, but it's mostly because of the elephant in the room, which is Technoblade's passing in 2022 from cancer, a horrible tragedy that the community and the Internet at large still struggles to handle and process. He was a big part of the project, he was a huge part of the plot everyone was setting up, and all indications are that doing it without him was understandably too much for a group of people grieving a friend to handle. (As someone whose worst nightmare is probably "grieving in public," I really admire that they brought the project to any kind of conclusion at all.) The story basically has a Rocks Fall, Everyone Dies ending and I get why. (Though certain creators have gone back and given their own plotlines a softer or more narratively satisfying conclusion in the years since).

But! If you're asking, "so all that serious stuff isn't just people in the fandom recontextualizing something more lighthearted and silly?" The answer is no, a lot of it isn't. This is a story that takes itself pretty seriously being told on purpose, with actual dramatic moments, similar to a tabletop campaign. There are certainly some moments that are more joke than plot device or character moment, and that gave people space to also explore that silly-turned-serious aspect which made other, older fandoms in this space so fun to write fic for.

But yeah. It has a real plot. It has a scripted story. For those of you being exposed to it for the first time via my description, welcome to the world of Minecraft RP! I was also unfamiliar with it at the start of this project, but it's a pretty fun little corner of the internet. There are lots of different ones; right now, we are just focusing on this one.

The creators are playing characters, though the level those characters are "versions on themselves" (basically just the creator in Improv Mode reacting as if events were happening to them instead of the avatar on the screen, while doing their best not to metagame) vs "this is

a fully differentiated character with a thought-through backstory and motivations separate from mine that I have considered" varied wildly creator to creator.

This is why the fandom says they aren't writing RPF.

Fic writers are writing these RP characters, and the plot that the creators told with those characters. It doesn't have much to do with the streamers themselves at all. The fandom even has a codified way of expressing this: c![Name] is the RP character, and cc![Name] is the Content Creator (sidenote. God I hate that term. I'll be continuing to use "creator" or "streamer" on purpose), and that was begun at the request of Dream himself after a particularly intense part of the RP in which he (or rather, his character) isolates and torments Tommy's. He got on Twitter and was basically like "hey. when you're talking about this part of the story, could you PLEASE make it obvious that I am not ACTUALLY TORMENTING THIS TEENAGER IRL." And the whole fandom basically went "Okay, that seems reasonable!" Because it seemed genuinely pretty reasonable.

Other than the c/cc divide, there was also Lore vs. Not Lore. Basically, when this was being streamed live, creators would put "lore" in the stream's title if they were doing plot shit, and "not lore" when they were just dicking around and building with blocks. Theoretically, there was a clear RP/Not RP divide. In practice, that didn't always work out, but it was there in theory.

"Oh," you might be saying. "Huh. Well, that's kinda a weird situation, but it also makes sense. It also clears everything up, right? We don't say that fic about The Adventure Zone or Critical Role is RPF, so this isn't RPF either. Mystery solved."

I also had this moment. I had this exact thought. There was a blissful moment back in maybe November of 2024 where I arrived at this conclusion, nodded to myself, and prepared to move on with my life with my biggest question answered. I stood up from the table and prepared to walk away.

But then I stopped. I blinked. I clicked over to the general fandom tag.

The second most popular DreamSMP relationship tag on AO3 is "Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson | Philza." This foursome has been dubbed "SBI," which stands for "Sleepy Bois Inc.," which is a name they came up with themselves.

In streams that have nothing to do with this roleplay.

When they are aggressively not in character, even a little bit.

In fact, far as I can tell (and please note that there are hundreds of hours of footage that's technically "canon" and much of it has been lost to time), these four characters share the screen together a grand total of once during the DSMP, and it is brief, stilted, awkward, and incohesive. In character, these four, though connected, are not close as a unit.

However, if you sort the fandom by kudos, 15 out of the 20 fics on the "front page" include this dynamic in some way (or used to—in one instance, a fic has been edited to not include Wilbur Soot). And what that dynamic means is also very codified in the fandom—it's not

brief, stilted, awkward, and incohesive, it's very warm and affectionate and usually familial. That's ubiquitous. It's everywhere.

It is not a part of the RP.

I sat back down at the table.

Something else is going on here.

OKAY, SO WHAT THE *FUCK* IS GOING ON HERE?

Let's explore in good faith—is DSMP fic RPF?

Well, we've already answered the main reason why people say it isn't: they *aren't* writing about the real people, they're writing about plot lines and characters from the semi-scripted RP I've just outlined.

But this gets murky right away as, like I said, only a very small portion of these creators can be said to have intentionally created *characters,* as in putting some level of thought into backstory and/or motivations outside of "this'll be funny and/or cool," or what the streamers themselves would do.

Out of the 30-odd creators in this project, I'd say probably a fourth or less could really be said to have created differentiated characters in the traditional sense. Those who did that and were also very involved in the greater plot include Quackity, Awesamdude/Sam, Charlie Slimecicle(though he entered the story late), Wilbur Soot (though he had a tendency to change his backstory and retcon things on a whim), and Ranboo (though they were pretty mum about actually sharing any of that with the audience). We can also probably add Dream himself and BadBoyHalo—who led one of the two mind control plots—to that list, as they were certainly making decisions based on in-story motivations rather than IRL motivations (though if either of these guys ever shared any information about where their characters got those motivations from, I am unaware of it).

There are also several creators who fall into an interesting middle ground where they didn't really *start out* with characters and were just acting as they usually do on stream but, as everything evolved and the whole server went all-in on this story, they started seriously considering "okay, if this WAS real and DID happen to me, how would it change me and the choices I make?" And, by modifying their behavior based on the answers to that question, they sort of *ended up* with differentiated characters by the middle/back half of the story. I'd say this is what happened with Tommy, Tubbo, Nihachu/Niki, Eret, and a few others.

But that still leaves the majority of the creators just sort of. Being themselves, as they are in other videos/streams.

Even Technoblade, who as mentioned was a massive force on the plot and the subject of some of the story's most remembered and recursed moments, usually doesn't seem to be *playing a character* so much as he's doing bits and occasionally getting to let loose (fantastically over the top) dramatic monologues, which is something he was prone to doing anyway. He has a plot, certainly, but *character* is harder to nail down.

It seems like he started thinking about character motivation more towards the middle of the story, once everyone started getting really into storytelling, but he was still acting basically the same way he does in his videos that have nothing to do with roleplay. Yeah, he's paranoid, he's overprepared, he's extremely good at fighting, he has a lot of loyalty to the people who are loyal to him—but those are traits that are pretty consistent across basically everything he ever did. There's a lot of fun to be had if you take some of his early actions on dramatic value and not with the lens of "doing what was most fun or causing the most chaos at the time," because some of it is so inconsistent on a "character" level. Taking that and then working backwards, asking "what kind of person would have made both of these choices," is a really fun exercise and can bring you to a lot of fun places, and the fandom has mined (ha) deep into just that. But most of it is work that *the fandom* is doing, which is, as I just went into, an RPF thing.

(Will also say that, man. Getting to know this individual's work only in the past tense was very melancholy and it made me sad. Hope you're resting well, Alex Technoblade. You and I share a June 1 birthday.)

So to review, per the fandom, it's not RPF because we're dealing with RP characters—except that in most cases, we really aren't really dealing with constructed *characters*, for all that there's a plot. Or, put a different way: there are characters, but they are functionally identical to what the creator acts like when not roleplaying.

Because of that, people writing fics often pull, both subconsciously and on purpose, from the creator's other work. Names and appearances of IRL pets are common, for instance, as are the inclusion of IRL hobbies, skills, or attributes that a creator might have mentioned having or doing (this runs the gamut from "character can play an instrument" to "character is portrayed as looking more like the streamer themselves than their in-game avatar"—Tubbo's Minecraft skin is blond, for instance, but you'll need to work very hard to find fanart or fic where he isn't a brunet, and Jschlatt's appearance in DSMP fanwork is pulled almost entirely from the way he actually looks, with added goat horns for. Spice? I guess?). Pulling ideas from events that happened in other servers or videos is also extremely commonplace—Tommy having wings/being an "avian" is pretty common in fanworks, and that comes from a different series of streams done in the Origins Minecraft mod which is Minecraft + added fantasy races, for instance; Quackity straight up mentions Minecraft Mondays by name while in a Serious Plot Moment; the idea that Phil and Techoblade have previously taken over or ruled a world together comes from SMPEarth, yet another separate server, which was actually actively confirmed to *not* be canon by the creators.

But it's not just backstory details or small character details—sometimes, large parts of character personality are drawn from various non-RP sources. A significant example of this is once again Wilbur Soot, whose character spends most of the DSMP's plot either being a manipulative bastard, unstable and destructive to himself and everyone around him, or dead and a ghost with a different personality (because that's how ghosts work in this story). Meanwhile, a lot of fic about him pulls from a more "tenderhearted, soft sadboi" kind of characterization which is more in line with the way he presented himself on his non-RP streams (and then he turned out to actually be a bastard, as beforementioned, but the audience didn't know that so put it aside for now).

A lot of fics with more neutral, sympathetic, or positive portrayals of Dream's character (who is also a popular "irredeemable antagonist" type) pull characterization from his other videos and content, because the audience actually sees very little of Dream's POV in the story. Those are two examples of many.

And of course, sometimes full character relationships are brought in from non-RP media and moments and are treated as part of the accepted fanon (this is also what I mean when I say "uniquely inaccessible fandom," lol). For all that Dream/George was a cornerstone ship and the subject of a lot of the early mega-popular fics (it's waned in popularity as time has gone on for a lot of reasons), and for all that it's still in the top 10 ship tags in the fandom (and one of only three that don't involve Tommyinnit at all), it's also something that doesn't really come into play once the server pivots to focusing on heavy RP story, because George wasn't that interested in or involved with the plot at all until the end game. So that dynamic *must* come from other videos. (This is all made more murky—yes, we can get even MORE murky, never underestimate the levels of murky this fandom can give you—because there is actual, fully admitted RPF of these two. But more people seem to have flipped to the These Are Character Versions mindset as time went on.) There are some people who say this ship isn't part of the DSMP for the same reason.

I've already touched on the SBI thing but, to explain a little more, the way these characters are connected in the canon plot looks something like this: "unhealthy and codependent chosen brothers with a large dollop of one-sided hero worship" (Tommy-Wilbur); "two people who hear each other but are not listening to or understanding each other even a little" (Wilbur-Technoblade) "estranged father and son gone very wrong" (Wilbur-Philza; yes their characters are actually father and son and Philza's introduction to the story is him killing Wilbur's character); "wow this kid my son dragged in here sure expects a lot from me" (Philza-Tommy); "broken mentor-mentee with several layers of betrayal" (Tommy-Technoblade); "You're the only motherfucker here I trust" (Philza-Technoblade).

Which, while certainly interesting (and the web of connection is there), is a far cry from, is a far cry from what you see most often in fanfic, which as beforementioned is a cohesive unit, often portrayed in some way familial (often with Phil playing dad and the other three assigned brothers and children).

There's probably yet another whole other very long meta on the directions the fandom took and still takes SBI, though I am not going to be getting much deeper today than I already have. I would recommend checking out antimony_medusa's write up on the timeline of the "dadza" phenomenon here, and I will quote her because I think she articulates the split I'm also trying to articulate well (and with much more background and first hand experience in this fandom): "A common refrain is that cc phil is a great dad, c phil is a terrible dad, so this fic is writing phil as a good dad cause that's what's real. [...] It becomes a common interpretation that okay in LORE phil is only wilbur's dad, but in like pure SBI phil is everybody's dad, and people are writing just the pure character dynamic, not LORE. This is still tagged as not RPF."

Basically, for the amount of emphasis the fandom puts on the creators being totally separate from the RP characters, there's a lot being pulled from sources outside the RP characters.

But I also don't want it to seem like I think there's zero merit to the idea of this *not* being RPF, because it would be dishonest to say that there isn't something here that feels different from how other RPF fandoms operate. The "idealism, when faced with imperfection and tainted with ego, fractures into the destruction of what idealism sought to build" arc of DSMP's Wilbur Soot is an intentional, self-contained arc that really doesn't have much to do with Wilbur Soot as he presented himself in his other streams or William Gold, Real Life Man. Alternatively, there's something really interesting and gripping about the layers of misunderstandings and betrayals and missed-chance loyalty that Tommy and Technoblade's characters have for each other, and it's totally removed from their dynamic in videos away from the plot. There are also a few RPed romances between characters in the plot that have real stakes and emotional consequences between people who did not date in real life (and, as far as we know, who do not match each other's attraction profile).

There are also a lot of creators here who seem to be perfectly open, expressive, self-aware people from what they share about themselves in real life, but the versions you find in the plot come across as deeply (and sometimes compellingly!) emotionally repressed, because of their reactions or non-reactions to things that the audience is being asked to take seriously. They completely ignore events framed as dramatic and traumatic, they brush things off with a joke, they barrel through with no emotional reaction. This is often because said creator is not good at or not comfortable with heavy emotional roleplay, and so they're not engaging on that level (which is a fascinating meta level to the storytelling that's very unique to this type of narrative). But if you're taking that repression at face value and not really acknowledging the person "behind the curtain," I do see why people feel like they are writing about something totally removed from that person.

So I'm not against this classification, is what I'm saying. If this was simply how the fandom defined and talked about itself—"we're writing fanfic about a roleplay, why would we call it RPF?"— and proceeded accordingly, I might have gone "hm, that's interesting. I'm not sure that's how I would have described it, but I see your logic" and stopped before I started writing.

But here's the thing: the fandom *doesn't* proceed accordingly. The fandom loudly and defensively insists that they are not writing RPF, while also having conversations, arguments, and discourse that only happen or make sense if they are writing RPF.

Let me explain.

As you might imagine, there are specific problems and discourses that basically only arise in RPF spaces—or, rephrased, there are subjects and discussions that *don't* typically come up in fandoms that aren't RPF based.

For instance, one does not usually ask a creator if they are *okay* with fanworks being made of their story or characters—it's basically implied at this point that fanworks will exist if something gains an audience (and if they don't like it, they often just won't say anything about it. We are thankfully far past the days of Anne Rice). Sure, someone will probably ask a smaller artist if they're okay with someone else making art of their OCs in a vacuum, but once something is presented to the world as a narrative, fanworks tend to follow.

Even if people do ask, they certainly don't go out of their way to talk to and ask every creator involved to draw and define lines about what kinds of fanworks they are and aren't comfortable with. (You don't see large numbers of people asking, for instance, every person who RPs a character on The Adventure Zone if they are or aren't comfortable with people drawing ship art of their character.)

I'm not going to say this never comes up in more standard fandom spaces, because it pops up, but it's almost always more niche discourse. Most often, if it comes out that a creator really hates, for instance, a fan-favorite ship, the general consensus is usually "lol. lmao, even" (as an example, Jeff Davis, the executive producer and main writer of Teen Wolf, infamously hated Sterek. This did NOT stop the fandom).

However, this is something that comes up in RPF spaces, as we've already covered, particularly in RPF spaces that focus on web creators because of how thin the audience-creator divide can be. People want to ask for explicit permission, a thumbs up, a blessing that they aren't doing something wrong. And people often want the creator to get specific with it: not just an "are you okay with people writing stories about you," they ask, "are you okay with shipping? NSFW? Specific kinds of headcanons?"

Now, I've already gone into why I think that's bad form and a bad idea. But more than anything, I need to reiterate: this is a conversation that really *only* dominates RPF spaces specifically.

And this is absolutely a constant, ongoing conversation in DSMP fandom spaces. "Boundaries" are a huge talking point and sticking point within the community. They are mentioned and sometimes outlined (or, more confusingly, brought up and not outlined in full) in event descriptions. People get banned from discord servers and online spaces if they have an AO3 bookmark that violates a "boundary." They get brought up to the creators themselves to the extent that even finding out about it in retrospect and from the outside makes me want to phase into the floor (because, as I've said, the best boundary is the fourth wall, and the fourth wall should always be God).

These creator-set boundaries completely govern many if not most parts of the MCYT fandom space.

To just say it outright, if this fic was in no way RPF and not treated as RPF, this *wouldn't be an issue.* If this really was just about the RP characters and had nothing to do with the Real Life Streamers as they present themselves in public, this straight up wouldn't be something people talked about. If the creator/character boundary was as strong as people insist it is, the "boundaries" of the people who made, write, and voice a character shouldn't have much of an impact on what the fandom does and doesn't do.

And that isn't true.

Here's something else that usually doesn't become a huge talking point in more standard fandom spaces: the age of, not only the characters, but also *the actors playing the characters.* When the first part of *It* (2017) or Stranger Things became popular enough to have active fandoms, everyone happily wrote fic and engaged with the fandom despite both the characters and actors being teenagers.

This particularly does not become a talking point in spaces where the actor is not visible and being portrayed through non-embodied means: think voice actors who are behind a character model, for instance. The Kataang vs. Zutara ship wars both past and present carry on cheerfully without much comment on the fact that Zachary Tyler Eisen, the voice of Aang, was actually about 12 when the show was being made.

This is something that certainly gets more discourse and discussion in non-RPF spaces than my first point, particularly recently—lots of people are thinking way too hard about fictional children and if they count as real children (they do not)—but it's still not really "mainstream" discussions, if that makes sense. You need to be pretty deep into internet fandom discourse or in specific spaces to see a lot of "Is it okay to ship this cartoon character if they are being voiced by a minor??"

Why do I bring this up? Well, here's something really important about the DSMP that I've alluded to before, but haven't really gotten into yet: many of the most watched streamers who took part in it were teenagers when all this was happening. Five of the participants were under the age of 18, and of those five, three were huge players, drew in some of the highest view counts and also had incredibly active parts in the plot—that's Tommyinnit, Tubbo, and Ranboo. Tommy and Tubbo were like 15 when they started getting internet famous and 16/17 during the height of all of this, and Ranboo is only a year older than them.

This was the cause for a lot of the fandom's…let's call them *quirks,* and we will get back to that in more depth in a little bit. In this moment, just know that there were a lot of fandom rules about these three about what you could and couldn't write with them, specifically because they were minors. Romantic shipping and sexual content were at the top of that list.

As in they, the people streaming and telling the story, were minors.

Now, the characters they were *playing* were also teenagers, but some of the most popular fandoms ever have teenage main characters and that doesn't stop fandom from doing whatever they want with them (nor should it, because they're not real teenagers). Harry Potter, literally any shonen anime, Percy Jackson, Voltron, the Young Justice cartoon—I can go on. That isn't usually a problem to this degree.

I need to stress that fandom-enforced rules about these characters were because *the streamers* were under 18, not the characters they were ostensibly playing in Minecraft.

And, again, that would not matter if this wasn't RPF.

For all DSMP fandom insists what they are writing is totally different from what RPF writers do, the fandom also acts like they are writing RPF. They have RPF discussions. They *give themselves* RPF problems.

This certainly seems to indicate that this fic in some way *feels* like RPF in a way people aren't comfortable talking about, despite all the ample evidence that this could very well be considered not RPF.

None of this really answers the original question of "is this considered RPF," though.

So I decided to do the time-honored English studies academic strategy for when you're confronted with a subject that hasn't been totally parsed out and talked about—you find something similar that *has* been parsed out and talked about, and talk about your subject the same way we talk about that similar thing. Okay, let's find an equivalent fandom and see how that fandom talks about themselves.

…hm. Well. About that.

Challenge: as we've already been over, the DSMP and its IC/OOC boundaries are kinda insane and it's hard to find a piece of media that is a neat equivalent. I already brought up D&D podcasts several times, just for the roleplay aspect of it, but as an equivalent, it doesn't work at all. There is a very clear IC/OOC boundary and neither actors or fandom seem to ever really cross it.

I looked to other recent, popular web creator RPF, and continued not to find a good equivalent. Something like Buzzfeed Unsolved RPF, for instance, has an element of on screen vs off screen personalities, but it doesn't have a concrete, non-reality plot the way DSMP does. I returned to Yogscast fic because they did one of the earliest if not THE first plot-driven Minecraft roleplay with the Shadow of Israphel series (I think this is actually the first Minecraft creator fic currently on AO3!), but the heyday of that fandom was long enough ago and the vibes were so different that it didn't really work for what I wanted. While the main character of The Magnus Archives is famously also named Jonathan Sims, same as the writer and character's voice actor, the name and voice are literally the only thing those two share.

Honestly, at first, the one piece of media I had that really embraced a similar "the creators are kinda-sorta characters" dynamic was 2010s Slenderman ARGs—specifically Everman HYBRID, which does in fact have fic and a still-active fandom—but the fandom was so comparatively small, and the creators weren't and aren't public figures the way the DSMP streamers are, and the IC/OOC break is made clean enough with context that it also didn't really work.

So I stared at a wall for a little while, and then I realized. Oh. Duh. Professional wrestling. This is at least adjacent to kayfabe.

To those unfamiliar with the term, kayfabe is a term used in professional wrestling that describes staged or scripted shows being presented as organic/"real," and also the audience's willingness to suspend their disbelief and take what is being presented to them as reality. There are constructed wrestling storylines, and wrestlers have constructed characters, but "in kayfabe," everyone takes it as face value reality (including the viewer) and rolls with it.

You see why I thought this would be very useful to me. So here's a side quest question I needed to answer in order to answer my original question: Do *professional wrestling* fic writers consider what they're writing to be RPF?

Well, upon exploring the tag on AO3, you'll find under 10 fics with the defensive "Not RPF" tag as of writing (DSMP has over 3,000 works with the tag), but there are many more fics with the "kayfabe compliant" tag, and I didn't know enough about the fandom space to know

if that meant the same thing with the same tone. I knew very little about wrestling fandom, particularly the side of it that writes fic, I didn't know anyone who did.

So I did what any sane person who has spent the past year of their life writing over 30k of fandom meta would do: I went into the general Professional Wrestling tag sorted chronologically, keyword searched "tumblr" in the author's notes, and I started looking for people to talk to. As one does.

Cheers, pro wrestling fandom, everyone I spoke to was very kind and shockingly willing to entertain a crazy person crashing into their tumblr DMs like "HI HELLO CAN I ASK YOU A QUESTION OR TWO?"

Results: the overwhelming response was basically that different people consider what they write to be more or less RPF and certain people prefer to read the "kayfabe compliant" fics because they're more interested in riffing off the story being told intentionally then the real life guys, and that it also depends a lot on the wrestler that someone is focusing on, because different people bring more or less of their actual personality and life into their character (I learned that American wrestling in particular is notorious for blurry IRL and kayfabe moments!) and, in certain cases, you the viewer are actually encouraged to think about the IRL person's life and experiences when thinking about their character.

But here's the most important thing I walked out of these conversations with: this isn't really a *discourse topic.* It comes up in conversation, people chat about it, people muse on the character/real guy boundary, but it doesn't cause fights. It seems to be pretty easy to interact with the fandom and write fic and never get caught up in this discourse. I certainly saw a lot less "RPF DNI" in bios and pinned posts when exploring this fandom space than I saw when exploring MCYT.

I will paraphrase one of the people I spoke to, who said that most people who write pro wrestling fic are aware that they are working in something of an RPF gray area, and just kind of shrug, accept this, and move on.

So there's the answer to our side quest question. Does professional wrestling fic, which operates in the media that created the idea of kayfabe, consider itself to be RPF? Kind of! But the writers don't get caught up in the weeds of it.

(Sidenote on my side quest: I think there's a lot of rich discussions and analysis to be had about the way that professional wrestling and Minecraft roleplay speak to each other, and I would love to see someone with more background and experience in wrestling fandom try to take that on.)

Back to our original question, with more of an answer this time: Is DSMP fic RPF?

Honestly? After months of work and exploration and research, the answer I have reached is, just like in pro wrestling fandom, "kind of." If you'll let me indulge in a double negative, I would say that it certainly isn't *not* RPF.

There are compelling aspects of this fandom space that feel very distinct from RPF, and I do think there are writers who are very firmly working with roleplay elements and not being

disingenuous when they say so. I don't think those writers are *lying* when they say they have very little interest in the creator as a person, and I don't even disagree with their logic about why they label their work the way they do. But! I also think that there are many, many aspects that are exactly like RPF. And I would even go as far as to say that a huge reason that DSMP was such rich soil for fic was because of that compelling gray area, that beautiful ambiguity, the scaffolding from a plot but the full transformative power that you get in RPF spaces.

When exploring the role that archetype plays in fandom in this little essay, Rana Eros makes this point: there is a lot of tolerance of and embracing of archetypal narrative in RPF spaces, and attributes that the the "canon" of RPF being "a little tricky" and having lots of room for contradictions. I think that this is a correct observation, and I think that articulates why RPF can be so fun: there's even more room for *interpretation* here than in other forms of fanwriting. Everything is much more fluid, and you can weave your own ideas around the preexisting ideas much more easily than in other types of narratives.

An example: How many ways can we tell the same scene? Here's a moment of canon: a group of characters dubbed "the butcher's army" (Ranboo, Fundy, Quackity, and Tubbo) head off to capture a proclaimed-retired Technoblade and execute him for crimes against the state. This actual scene already plays out via five different POVs, one per participating streamer (plus an extra one from someone hanging back and watching). But now you, the viewer, can bring your own interpretations of other outside events and relationships to make this interaction mean even more things.

This scene reads much differently if Technoblade and Quackity first met and clashed in some kind of "death game" before this whole conflict began (they were in Minecraft Monday together—it's not a far out interpretation, and Quackity name drops it directly in this scene). Does it change again if you cast them as actually pretty friendly with each other, but Technoblade often ribs Quackity for being unskilled? (That would be pulling from other, out of character videos. But we can take it as dramatic fodder). Technoblade surrendering takes on a different flavor if you cast him as someone who has already gained and lost an empire (and as I mentioned, SMPEarth, or elements of it, is an incredibly popular fanon backstory beat). How does this scene change if, as one popular interpretation states, Tubbo is taking these actions while visibly and brutally scarred by a wound that Techoblade gave him?

That's literally just the start of the dramatic baggage a writer can bring to this scene, depending on what direction they're coming from. You can write a million different fics about this scaffolding interaction (which devolves into giggling and jokes a few times, because these guys just can't help but be silly) that give voice to different characters, explore different themes, whump different blorbos. That is not a level of resculpting events that comes easily to more traditional forms of storytelling, but it is par for the course in this kind of web creator RPF. Go back to the Achievement Hunter kings tournaments I outlined—we the audience need to do a lot more interpretation and pull from different knowledge sources to make this story come alive. We, the audience, are *making it* come alive. The elements you can bring in from the outside of strict "characters" and "plot" are part of the fun.

Understand that, even in the world of fanwriting which embraces interpretation of a creative act, that level of fluidity is not something you in fandoms for traditional media, or very much

at all outside of RPF.

If you are interested in the way the in way the fuzzy in-character/out-of-character boundary functions and enhances the MCYT experience, the ways in which is defines the genre and makes it as special as it is, and how denying the fandom's RPF aspects is really taking away from that specialness, I would recommend checking out the essay Barrier Blocks by Mer, which dives into it in depth, taking into consideration the way the video game genre works and is being transformed and the ways in which this fits into performance and theater theory. It is very well articulated and cited—honestly, it's a much better piece of academia than this is, I am well aware this reads like a 3 a.m. car ride rant as I try to keep myself from falling asleep at the wheel.

But I am not really interested in that and, as something of a fandom outsider (or at least a fandom newbie), I'm not really the best person to articulate it.

Here's what I'm interested in: *why* the DSMP is so invested in this not being RPF, how it got itself to this point, and what that says about the state of fandom subculture as a whole.

What's unique about DSMP and, in the wake of the nuclear bomb of its explosion in popularity, the rest of the MCYT fic space, is how the fandom responds to the phrase. There's no "shrug and move on, yeah it's kinda RPF" attitude that I saw in the crowd who writes professional wrestling fic.

It matters, to the DSMP fandom, that they aren't writing RPF. They need the world to know it. They need it not to be questioned. They cannot be writing RPF, because RPF is bad.

And, listen, for all I needed to actively search for an equivalent fandom, and for how difficult it was to find a *whole fandom* that was mostly analogous to Minecraft RP's core conceit, there have been plenty of very similar *situations* and moments in fandoms before, and it hasn't mattered then.

For instance, let's go back to Bandom. My Chemical Romance's fourth studio album is called *Danger Days: The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys*. This is a concept album (basically all MCR albums are). It takes place in post-apocalyptic California, where an evil corporation has taken over society and forces conformity, and the band plays colorful rebels in the desert trying to take them down. Gerard Way later published a comic mini series in the same universe.

In the album, the members of the band portray their "Killjoy" alter-egos who all have super cool names and costumes—Party Poison (Gerard Way), Fun Ghoul (Frank Iero), Jet-Star (Ray Toro), and Kobra Kid (Mikey Way). Yes, it was a coming of age right of passage when I was in middle school to pick your Killjoy name (mine was Purple Ghost, I've always been consistent in my branding). There are a series of very narrative music videos for the album, which show the lives of the Killjoys, them staging a rescue, and then them all dying dramatically.

As you can imagine, this was incredible fic fodder. People had so much fun with this. There are lots and lots of MCR fics in this Killjoys universe on AO3 alone, and many more on

LiveJournal from Bandom's heyday. During this heyday, there were a few different ways that people handled character:

Sometimes, Party Poison would be literally Gerard Way (the apocalypse event that happens in the Killjoys comic literally happens in our world, and the Fabulous Killjoys are the actual band My Chemical Romance who have become freedom fighters in our future); sometimes, the writer would retell the Gerard Way narrative in the context of the Killjoys universe (a depressed guy under the thumb of the corporate overlords who has an epiphany moment and decides to use music to make the world better); sometimes, Party Poison is mostly what we see in the music videos, and has very little to do with the Gerard Way narrative, but he has Gerard Way's mannerisms, philosophies, and creeds added for spice and depth.

You can certainly make the argument for the third one being not RPF, particularly if the writer referred to him as "Party" or "Party Poison" the whole time (and many did). But no one ever claimed that. That was never a question. Everyone was comfortable not drawing that line, calling this RPF, and moving on.

"RPF" wasn't this…almost dirty, tainted concept people can be infected with.

That isn't true anymore. At least not in this fandom space—and all the fandoms it's adjacent to.

Why?

WHY IS THE DSMP LIKE THIS?

There are a few reasons.

First and foremost, DSMP did what no fandom is ever supposed to do: it took RPF out of the RPF bubble.

I need you to understand something. I need you to understand that, at time of posting, if you sort all of AO3 by kudos, most to least, and look at the "front page," two of the fics there are DSMP fics, one completed in 2021 and the other completed in 2022. The other fandoms is shares that front page with are: Harry Potter (the rotten bones web fandom is built on), with eight fics spanning publication between 2015-2023; the MCU (a pop culture behemoth that defined media from at least 2012 until the present day) with fics published in 2014 and 2021/4; BNHA (probably the most popular and influential shonen of the past 15 years) with five fics published between 2017 and 2021; Haikyuu!! (probably the other most popular shonen of the past 15 years) with a fic published in 2015; ATLA (one of the most beloved western children's cartoon of all time) with a fic published in 2021; Stranger Thing (one of the defining television shows of the streaming era) with a fic completed in 2025; and uh. also one fic published in 2023 for the 1971 film *A Death In Venice,* based on the short story by German writer Thomas Mann which, upon investigation, appears to have been the target of a really intense bot spam? My apologies to that author, dear god. (Recently kicked off the front page was Star Wars, one of the most popular media franchises ever, with a fic published in 2015.)

I am including dates here to point out that nearly all of these pieces of media, save DSMP (and putting aside the botspam), have existed for AT LEAST a decade, and have been cultivating and growing their fanbases for that long. Stranger Things started in 2016, meaning it only just missed the cutoff, by nature of me posting this in December. DSMP *started* in 2020.

To be fair, the next RPF fandom you see is on the second page, and it's a BTS fic that is over 400,000 words (published in 2018/9). BTS debuted in 2013 and people have been writing fic for them since not long after that. There is also DSPM fic on the second page.

The first time you run into an RPF fic in a fandom that isn't those two above-mentioned is on page 11 (as of writing). It is a One Direction fic from 2014, meaning it has had over a decade to accumulate the kudos it has. Between page 3 and page 11, there are six BTS fics, most published between 2018 and 2020. There are *seven* DSMP fics. On those first 11 pages of AO3 sorted by kudos, that is more fic than Merlin (four) and Supernatural (shockingly, only one? That's a batshit piece of information to me), two of the other monoliths of 2010s fandom culture. All of the DSMP fics are published during or after 2020.

Think of other fandoms that pop into your head when you hear "RPF." Other K-Pop groups? Supernatural RPF? Bandom? Phandom? Formula 1? Hockey? Tiny. Miniscule. None of them even come close. The highest-kudosed Supernatural RPF fic on AO3 (that is actually a fic and not either a trope primer or a huge crossover drabble collection) has 2,933 kudos. The highest-kudosed DSMP fic has *92,164.* BTS has significantly more fics by number, but its highest-kudosed fic has over 38,200 kudos *less than that.*

I need you to understand that this wasn't some niche community within a niche community. DSMP fic was more than popular—it was *mainstream*, in a way that RPF never has been before and, quite frankly, probably should never be again. Not for any moral reasons but just, like, for sanity reasons I'm about to get into. We should never do this again.

To go back slightly: the thing about BTS fic is that, for all the fandom's unbelievable stats, the fic behaves exactly how I've always seen RPF behave. (In some ways, I actually think it epitomises a lot of Standard RPF Behaviors, but that's a whole different discussion I shan't get into today.) Most importantly, the fic also stays in its bubble within the fandom, which makes total sense. This is a band that has 25.3 million followers on Spotify, and it's safe to assume they have even more fans than that. Even if we say that every single one of the very high number of fics on AO3 was written by a different representational person (which is not true), that would still total less than 1 percent of their fanbase. It is very easy to be a BTS fan and never actually interact with fanfic.

It was not easy to do that for DSMP, from my understanding. Because of how integral the fandom was to the actual storytelling, with the art, animations, and other fan content leading the charge on how people understood the story—check out the viewcounts of the most popular animatics, and they speak for themselves—people who had never really thought about fanfic before were being introduced to fanfic through this environment. It was the opposite of what happens with BTS; DSMP had a massive fanbase, an unconventional fanbase, and *most of that fanbase* was engaging with fanfic, many in a way they hadn't before.

Fic was being talked about often, loudly, alongside edits, fan art and animation, in full sight of where the creators could see it. It was not behind the fourth wall. Before this, I think the closest we ever got to "mainstream" RPF was probably the height of the One Direction moment, with a lot of young teens writing both self insert fic or getting into Larry shipping. But that was still fairly niche, numbers-wise, and it wasn't something *the entire Directioner fandom was discussing*.

In that way, DSMP very much took RPF out of what I can only describe as the "RPF bubble," or a space where everyone is, well, comfortable with not only fanfic, but with the unique brand of weirdness that comes with RPF. As mentioned, RPF is gremlin4gremlin writing, and it's traditionally written by people who are well aware and ready for the fact that they are being gremlins. You walk into it with your gremlin hat on and your gremlin card out and ready to be scanned at the door.

And you also walk into it with the expectation that it will be kept to the gremlin spaces. In the past, they were usually even labeled as such, usually with a knowing wink. (As an example, the fan forum for this kind of content about Channel Awesome creators was literally called The Secret Treehouse.)

None of this happened with DSMP because it was so fandom mainstream. It was filled with the young and the very fandom-uninitiated, many of them with not only no background in RPF, but no background in *literally any fandom*. Many people went from engaging with zero fanfiction to being linked to AO3 specifically because of this piece of media.

This is part of what led to the "reinventing RPF concepts while not calling it RPF" thing comes from—in some ways, this group of people *was* reinventing RPF and fic fandom in general. They were young, and they were often approaching this with no sense of or connection to fandom history. You can scroll through blogs and feeds and see people figuring out how to have arguments that more experienced fandom spaces have had hundreds of times before for the very first time.

That leads into the second reason why the DSMP is Like This: I already mentioned that this was a fandom space that skewed young, because that was the audience for these streamers. Now, fandoms that skew young already have a tendency to be very…Like That, just by nature of their age range, which is totally okay and to be expected (and, if you know about it, pretty easy to avoid. I feel very old typing this out).

BUT. That fandom is *not* usually an RPF fandom. Which added yet another layer to this and really increased the level of judgement and sneering from people on the outside. And because this fandom space was filled with the young and the fandom-uninitiated, there was a lot of anxiety about that perception. One of the most important lessons you need to learn about fandom is that the space in general is for the weirdos of the world—don't listen to the people sneering at you, because they probably also have fic or fandoms the normies would call embarrassing.

Without that mindset, this was a space thrown into an "at least we're not [THING]" spiral, with the dreaded RPF (implication: someone who causes harm) being at the bottom. Any other "cringe" fandom wants to say "at least we're not RPF." This caused many people to reject the idea that they're writing RPF on principle because—well, middle school lunch

room logic. You don't want to be on the bottom of the food chain. Being a burnout is better than being a Designated Weirdo (and all-purpose bullying target).

Here's where we return to the pandemic and the lockdown. (Honestly, in some ways, I feel like we never really left it.) I'm not sure if this is fully a "third reason" or more like 2.5, but let's call it third for ease of counting.

Basically every five years or so, there is a new fandom that can generally be described as "kind of a weird media, catnip for weird teenagers, gets the reputation for being very loud and filled with annoying discourse, ends up on a lot of people's DNIs." It's just kind of the nature of the beast.

I've already mentioned that, because of how online everything was at this time, everything also felt a lot more urgent and immediate. I was there, I can attest: every single fandom went completely insane in 2020 and 2021. And some of that was that everyone's world was being so limited that what was online became people's world entire. But it was also because fandom basically became a lot of people's lifelines.

This is the part where I want to fully acknowledge that the DSMP has been a genuinely important, life-affirming fandom for people.

This is a community and a story that got a lot of people, many of them very young, through some of the most terrifying, isolating moments in recent history. I already mentioned that the streams themselves were able to give structure to days where structure basically didn't exist, but the fandom also created new connections in a time when new connections felt totally impossible. At its very best, fandom in general is about connection and community-building around a seed of shared passion. DSMP turned that up to 11—and, because it was filled with newbies, it was also their first experience with it.

In addition, the characters and themes—particularly the Teenagers Enduring Hardship Unnoticed beat which the very young fandom *ran with,* and ideas of platonic closeness and companionship that everyone was missing and craving during lockdown—was perfect projection fodder and therefore perfect *catharsis* fodder. This is a piece of media that got people through some serious shit.

And before you say that's cringe or something, I want you to take a second and think about the stories that got you through the horrors of being 15. Personally, I survived some of the hardest months of my adolescence by tracking days between Homestuck updates and watching *Once Upon A Time*. I have a friend who goes back to Naruto fic whenever he's having a depression episode. Weird media gets us through shit. It's kinda human nature.

So it's only natural that people are going to be protective of this story. And it's also natural, considering everything else I just conveyed, that people want a story that means this much to them to be something they can talk about and get excited about without feeling like they're being judged or deemed one of The Freaks. And many people think that RPF writers are The Freaks, and therefore the lowest rung of the middle school lunch room, and therefore open season for bullying.

So, again, this is why there's such a rejection of the idea that this might be, at the very least, closer to RPF than not RPF. Because people don't want something this important to them to also be so apparently worthy of scorn from the general fandom masses. People don't want to say "the reason I got through the pandemic halfway sane was real person fanfiction about Minecraft streamers," but they also want to talk about that community space. So there's this dedication to making the space not RPF.

Okay, so far we have breaking RPF containment, the size and age of the fandom, and the pandemic. Now let's go back to something I've already brought up—remember when I said that a lot of this fandom's quirks go back to the fact that so many of the big players were minors when it was at its peak?

Let's get into that.

Yes, the main trio of under-18s (to refresh: Tommyinnit, Tubbo, and Ranboo) were written (and drawn) into situations that were explicit, some of it sexual and some of it really, really violent and bloody/gorey. Yes, straight up, that crosses a line for a lot of people. That's uncomfortable. I'm not going to sit here and say I'm comfortable with it.

Yes, even people who give RPF the thumbs-up go "yeah, that feels different" about writing any RPF about minors.

And what's interesting is that this wasn't really a *conversation* until the DSMP exploded, because up until that point it was pretty rare that people this young ended up in a situation where writing RPF about them was even appealing and, if/when they did, there weren't usually enough eyes on the fanfiction outside of the people writing it for anyone to really question it.

For instance, One Direction were all between 16 and 18 when they were formed and gained their rabid fanbase, and there was certainly RPF being written about them at that time. But not only was the RPF space, and in fact fanfiction in general, much less mainstream at that point, I was there and can confirm that there was also the perception that the people writing these fics were exclusively teenage girls who were venting their own (therefore age appropriate) fantasies/crushes, and/or that these teenage girls were writing completely innocent, if cringey, boyfriend stories about getting asked to prom. Was this true? No, not everyone writing One Direction RPF was a teenage girl, and not every teenage girl writing One Direction RPF was writing "pure" and unproblematic stories. But sexism does incredible things to the human mind, so that was the perception.

None of this was true for the DSMP. Though, undoubtedly, some (possibly even a lot; possibly even most; it's unfortunately not possible for us to verify this) of the explicit fiction being written about these figures were being written by teenagers who were about their age, having age appropriate fantasies, that wasn't how people talked about it.

There seemed to be a baseline assumption that the people engaging with this content were adults fantasizing about teenagers.

And from that assumption and discomfort came the baseline assumption that people who wrote/engaged with RPF about the DSMP were predators, or in some way predatory, or at

least willing to think strange and impure thoughts about teenagers. Which led to people insisting even more loudly that they weren't writing RPF—after all, no one wants to be accused of something like that.

And once again, this connection didn't seem to be a loud and mainstream conversation until the DSMP took off. Someone on the RPF discomfort poll mentioned explicitly in their tags that they thought explicit RPF of minors should be treated like CSAM, and I was surprised by that response not because of the content of it, but because my first thought was "wait, is that something that happens? Is this something we're talking about, outside of very niche circumstances?"

It is now. Largely, from what I can gather, because of the DSMP.

But that conversation didn't stop people from wanting to write fic about this story that they were putting hundreds of hours of their lives into. Which is logical; transformative works follow narrative and passion, and this was a story people were very, very passionate about.

So the line of reasoning becomes, "We are uncomfortable with RPF being written about minors, but this is a narrative and a piece of media we want to write fic about, but we also don't want to be aligned with predators. So we're not writing RPF, even though we will enact rules based on the real people playing the character's real ages."

A lot of this comes from what I think is a sincere urge to protect these young people and the idea that there are certain things they shouldn't be subjected to. And I don't necessarily disagree—I do think that there are things that real life teenagers shouldn't be subjected to.

But here's another question I'd like to put forward—is the fanfiction the thing that is causing the problems here?

Because there are a lot of really difficult and complex conversations to have about the ethics of famous children on the internet, and we're thankfully starting to have those conversations in earnest. However, most of said conversations seem to be centered around very young children—the infamous "family channel farming their babies for clicks" situation, which has brought up a lot of important questions about child labor and exploitation and the right to privacy. Because of that, these conversations have also been centered around children being taken advantage of by the adults in their lives.

There have been, as far as I have seen, fewer conversations about the ethics and problems of older teenagers who put *themselves* out there and become famous on the internet in a way that's more long-term than a single viral video or 15mins of relevance. In this conversation emerges a difficult dichotomy: that 16 year olds are, in most ways, autonomous people who deserve the right to do things like make YouTube videos or TikToks or stream if they want to; and also that a 16 year old under the unsupervised scrutiny of millions of people, and possibly opting themselves into a whole life in the spotlight at that young an age, feels profoundly unfair and wrong.

(It is also important to note that, while most of the young people who will come up in this particular discussion seem to have been surrounded by good, non-internet adults who have their best interests at heart, there are also cases of young people who do not, adding an even

messier layer on top of this already messy discussion. It is horrifically easy to financially abuse a minor. I'm honestly shocked we don't have any stories about it happening in this space.)

The question I've discovered at the heart of this discussion is "can a teenager consent to the public eye and, if they can't, how do we give them the space to create and express themselves the way they deserve when nearly every modern outlet accessible to them can lead to the public eye?" And that is *way more complex an issue* than I am prepared to tackle here but, by articulating it, it becomes clear that the problem is less the audience itself and more *the act of being in front of an audience*.

In the MCYT space specifically, this gets even more messy, because a huge appeal of some of these creators (the three relevant to the DSMP discussion, yes, but also any other under-18 creators who has come up since) is how young they are. A very large part of their fanbases are people their own age and younger, who were psyched and excited to see someone just like them being cool and successful (and then a lot of that part of the fanbase get to grow up alongside them, leading to built-in continued success and lots of chances for diversifying content). They have older viewers too, I'm sure, who watch because they genuinely enjoy the humor, or are reminded of beloved little siblings, or themselves when they were that age, or because there is something really singular and wonderful about the creativity and energy of the young that is genuinely a joy to watch. But no matter what, the fact that they're young is important.

(That creativity and energy is also, in my opinion, another huge reason why the DSMP captivated as many imaginations as it did. The earnest, genuine reactions and ideas of young people taking a swing at storytelling and themes for the first time is almost always both incredibly compelling and also flawed in a way that you want to pick at, deepen, and explore. These three essentially had their high school self insert OCs become the biggest fandom in the world, and the thing about OCs you make in high school is that they are always filled with big ideas, themes you probably aren't ready to tackle, and probably a little more of yourself than you meant to share. Perfect for a fandom to run with, basically, particularly when given structure by an older and more experienced writer to make sure everything went down smooth.)

But the point is that their age becomes a *commodified aspect of their success*, and many of them seem aware of this and lean into it. As just one example, Tommyinnit's old thumbnail art went out of its way to show and draw attention to his braces. That is not something you do unless you want everyone to be able to tell, at a glance, that this person is a teenager. Many of them also drew attention to this verbally at every chance they got.

So, yes, aspects of the fanfiction and fandom were and are uncomfortable because of the age of the creators. But the thing about fandoms is that they are *inherently symptomatic.* By their nature, they grow from other things, and in that way often serve as a lens to pull issues people are dwelling on about those things to the surface. Fandom also, in general, cannot just be stopped—where people create narrative, transformative works follow. All attempts by creators and entities to stop them (and there are many people who would love to stop them; there's a reason OTW has a robust stable of lawyers) fail. And that extends to RPF—as I said

way back at the beginning, if a group of public figures hit enough of those points, fiction will follow. If they're in that position, it's going to happen.

The problem much more worth discussing is that they're in that position.

I'd also like to point out that the DSMP ended up being a very *adult* story, regardless of the ages of those participating in it, and that these three young people took an active part in telling some of the most adult aspects of it. Tommyinnit did an abuse and suicidal ideation roleplay live to hundreds of thousands of people, and it was played dead serious. There's a reason that, in movies, TV shows, and plays that handle dark and/or heavy themes, actors in their 20s are often cast as teenagers. There's also a reason why, in movies, TV shows, and plays, if there is a child or teenaged actor handling that heavy and/or intense material, it's standard operating procedure to have a professional on set to make sure those scenes are being acted out safely and that actor isn't doing something that's going to harm them in the long term. Hollywood has laws that are supposed to protect minors. Do they always work the way they are supposed to? No—but the point is that they're *there.*

Am I saying that this person was harmed in the longterm by this RP? No, I have no way of making that call and I'm not here to psychologically analyze a public figure I don't know. But I am saying that those protections and safeguards were certainly *not in place for him.*

There's a conversation to be had here about what happens to young people in the public eye, and the anxieties that people have about that. But fanfiction in general, and RPF in specific, is a *symptom of it,* not the cause. And very rarely does anything useful in the long term come from treating the symptom.

I realize that this whole section is a little bit of a digression. But I do think it's important to draw attention to the fact that focusing on fanfiction like it's the cause of this problem takes away from what could be a really important conversation about the way we commodify young people—and encourage young people to commodify themselves.

And the fact that everyone's reaction to that discomfort has been to lean so much into that "c/cc" divide, the fact that it's easier to deal with this via conceptualizing them as *fake young people* as opposed to dealing with the implications of them being *real young people*—I think that's something worth unpacking much more than the fact that RPF exists of something with all the logical flags of a dynamic that would create RPF.

But basically, to TLDR the fourth reason—because of how prominent people who are minors were in the story, writing RPF became "a pedo thing" which understandably no one wanted to be accused of.

Here's reason five: something else I've brought up a few times is the unfortunate recurring pattern of famous people/figures being revealed as people you probably don't actually want to support. Often, it's revealed that they're predators. Sometimes they're accused of other things, or reveal themselves to be a huge asshole, or a bigot, or a die-hard supporter of something you think is abhorrent.

Several people who were part of the DSMP fall into this category.

I've established already that Wilbur Soot is a domestic abuser, and that I'm not going to turn this already-lengthy meta into logging a list of people who have been accused of being terrible and how. The numbers include Dream himself and several others, and the level and verifiability of what these people are accused of vary and differ, and range from "asshole and homophobe" to "accused of assault." I'm not getting into it.

And remember how I said situations like this are an unfortunate recurring theme in RPF spaces? This is a situation that has absolutely happened in RPF spaces before, to the point where there is a standard way RPF spaces handle it. Here's an infamous one which maps pretty typically:

There was a time when hockey player Patrick Kane was one of the most prominent figures in the hockey RPF space. Patrick Kane/Jonothan Toews was the maybe most popular ship in the fandom, and many (I'd even go as far as to say most) fics focused on them and the Chicago team they were on. If they weren't the focus, they still at least *showed up* most of the time.

Then, in 2015, Patrick Kane was accused of sexual assault.

In the wake of this, hundreds of fics were orphaned, completely purged from the website and the internet, or edited to not include Kane. And you see why—yeah, a lot of people didn't even want to think about him anymore and no one wanted their fic to be taken as some kind of statement of support.

Out in the real word, the district attorney's office did not press charges against Kane because of a lack of substantiating evidence. Sometimes, in these situations, with enough time and distance, people will start writing fic again—but then everything else about that team came out in 2021, and the subject (and, tbh, the whole team) became radioactive to many fic writers.

The point is that these accusations largely shut down whatever fic writing fandom there was for them. There are writers who deleted their accounts and walked away from fandom altogether when this happened. I wouldn't say there was *no* fic being written, but there was *significantly less* fic being written.

That tends to be the pattern when a figure in an RPF space is accused of something abhorrent. Fics are purged, orphaned, or edited in massive numbers and the fic writing fandom either totally shuts down or slows to a crawl. That's also about what happened when Rooster Teeth's Ryan Haywood was revealed to be a predator, for instance, though that happened when the fandom was long past its most popular point.

That is, as you have probably guessed and/or know, not quite what happened with DSMP.

Yes, there were some fic purges/orphaning sprees. Yes, certain parts of the fandom slowed down—but they were already slowing down, after years with no content.

But many of these figures continue to be used in fic, with even more loud and obvious "CHARACTERS NOT CONTENT CREATORS" and "NOT RPF" disclaimers.

And I think the answer to the "why" here is clear (okay, guys, one last list for the road):

1. DSMP was an important, foundational story and fandom for many people.
2. It's uncomfortable to write RPF about people you do not want to support
3. Walking away from the story and the fandom feels bad
4. Okay, so let's really double down on not writing about the Real People, a sentiment that not only already existed, but that people also already felt passionately about.

You see how, again, this deflection is mostly about not wanting to confront and deal with discomfort.

And I empathize and understand this discomfort. I don't think there's a right or wrong answer about how someone chooses to continue to interact with the in-their-head character version of a real person who turns out to be a bad actor. There's endless nuance, and I don't think any of the choices people have had in the wake of the allegations—stop writing about the figure, continuing to write about the figure while making it obvious that they don't support the real person, write the figure out of existing WIPs, swap the figure with an OC or someone else, orphan all your works—are better or worse than the other.

But the way that people use the "it's not RPF" line as a way not to engage with this discomfort is something I think we should take notice of.

And, my last point, which is very tied into the one above:

This whole community, fans and creators alike, is fiercely protective of Technoblade's legacy. The DSMP is a huge part of that legacy. It was his last project. It was a project he didn't get to see through to the end he imagined. It was the height of his fame, the moment where he got to really show off his chops as a creative, the image of him that is crystallized in the minds of hundreds of thousands of people.

It's the last we'll ever see of him.

And much of that community—including other creators he was close to—considers talking about him and his work to be an important part of keeping that legacy alive. People very much use their art—writiing, drawing, whatever—and their engagement with the DSMP's story as an act of sincere (and really moving and beautiful) memoriam to him. This is a shrine, and I mean that with no hyperbole.

Having this world and this character and this story to play with, and to celebrate, and to send on adventures forever and ever has been one part memoriam and one part grieving process for thousands of people since 2022. There are people who left the fandom space and never returned after Technoblade died because it hurt too much, but just as many people continued creating as a real, tangible way to keep the fire burning. Is this a "typical" way of mourning a public figure? No, but I do think it's a lovely one.

But as aforementioned, many people involved in the project have been revealed to be bad actors. Also as aforementioned, people's reaction to that tends to be to abandon the fandom space entirely.

The idea of that story being tainted and untouchable because of the abhorrent behavior of bad actors who were revealed as bad actors after his death feels…well, bad is an understatement.

And if people just absolutely insist that this isn't RPF, they don't need to deal with how bad that feels. You don't need to confront the fact that something can be both a vessel for a beloved memory and a vessel for the idea of someone who caused real harm in the world which is, to be fair to everyone in this situation, a horrible, shitty thing to have to confront.

You see once again how this was the perfect storm. The scripting, the storytelling, the age bracket it attracted, the pandemic, the minors, the scandals, the grief. Why is the DSMP like this? Because I don't think these ingredients could have combined in any other way. Because it became an echo chamber that takes the idea that it's not writing RPF as both fact and absolution for something that no one ever needed to be absolved of.

It's a deeply compelling series of circumstances to unpack. It shows us a lot about why not just this fandom, but many fandoms, currently feel and operate the way that they do.

And here's the really interesting thing: that attitude is *spreading.* It is moving into spaces that grow from a similar soil but with very different intentions and goals.

DSMP had enough of a cultural impact that its attitudes are now the norm in MCYT spaces.

Next door neighbor of DSMP is Hermitcraft, another group of Minecraft creators who many of you are already very familiar with, who I would describe as, generally, standard. The DSMP was a roleplay epic on purpose; Hermitcraft is a bunch of people playing Minecraft on a shared server. They do bits together, and they sometimes toss silly "yes, and" storylines back and forth. There are a few exceptions to this, but these exceptions are clear breaks from the norm and the creators trying something out rather than the status quo.

In almost every way, it is the same set-up as the Achievement Hunter RPF of 10 years ago.

Hermitcraft is the third most popular fandom in AO3's Not RPF tag as of writing.

Many people in this space feel *even more* strongly that they're not writing RPF than people in the older DSMP space do. Except this circle of creators has none of the "alibis" (for lack of a better term) that the DSMP has. No script, for instance. No intentional character creation and differentiation from the motivations of what the Real People Want.

What Hermitcraft does have is many of the Will Get RPF flags that I talked about waaaaaaaaaaaay back at the start of this meta (in IRL time, over a full year ago; for you, dear reader, many thousands of words). There's fun interpersonal dynamics, gameplay that opens the creators up to off-the-cuff storytelling, compelling interpersonal lore and friendships, the audience participation of a Twitch chat.

Yet there it is—the constant insistence that this isn't RPF. *We aren't writing RPF. RPF is what the weird, bad people do.*

It's not just fandom nextdoor neighbors, either. When dipping my toes back into Achievement Hunter tags, I saw a similar sentiment. There were certainly a few wrestling fics with tags that echoed the same vibe. There's a tumblr post circulating that shows a comment with this attitude on a piece of actor RPF. It's circulating.

At the center of this current pan-MCYT fandom's certainly that they aren't writing RPF is that mantra, "Characters, Not Content Creators." The difference between what they are doing and what the weirdos who write RPF are doing is that they are focusing ONLY on the on-screen personas who exist in Minecraft, instead of wanting anyone IRL to kiss. No one is shipping real people, which is Bad. They are shipping *personas.*

But. You may notice, as someone who read the first chapter of this meta and everything else up to this point, that the golden rule of most RPF spaces is "Persona, Not Person." You may recall that first golden disclaimer that we started with: *This implies nothing about the people whose names are utilized.* The majority of RPF spaces are all about working with persona and from behind the fourth wall. That's what RPF *is*.

You may notice, with everything I just outlined and the fast and loose way the fandom interacts with canon, that "Characters, Not Content Creators" and "Persona, Not Person" is. basically the same thing.

So understand that, as someone with an extensive background in reading and interacting with RPF fandoms, entering these fandom spaces felt something like this:

I walk into a restaurant and go, "Oh, I see you're serving pizza." All of the chefs go, "What? No, you misunderstand, we find pizza morally objectionable. This isn't pizza." I go, "Uh. But I see that thing you're selling, and it looks like a pizza?" And the chefs go, "NO. That ISN'T pizza. It is an open-faced yeasted flatbread, baked with tomato sauce and cheese. Here, taste it, you'll find that it tastes NOTHING LIKE PIZZA."

And then I take a bite and like. It's mostly pizza. Maybe the crust has a slightly chewier texture then I'm used to and maybe there's something unique going on with the sauce but, you know. I've had a lot of pizza, and this is pizza.

Upon this being pointed out, the chefs go "IT'S NOT PIZZA. WE CAN PUT WHATEVER TOPPINGS ON THAT WE WANT AS LONG AS WE DON'T CALL IT PIZZA. ONLY WEIRD PEOPLE MAKE PIZZA."

I leave the restaurant feeling, mildly, like I am losing my mind.

And that feeling was one of the driving forces for me sitting down and starting this meta in the fall of 2024. Because the concept of a whole, united group of people, a whole fandom that has collectively written tens of thousands of fic, that are so anxious, worried, and uncomfortable about doing something weird in their creative space that they have reinvented RPF while calling it something else—that makes me raise my eyebrows.

And to be clear, I'm not saying that this is all RPF and that people should admit it because RPF is bad and I think everyone needs to confess their sins. I think I've made it clear that my stance is firmly "RPF is fine."

What I'm saying is that we should be aware of and question a culture that perpetuates the idea that, upon engaging with something that makes us uncomfortable or makes us feel something we're unsure about, we simply *insist it's something else* that doesn't make us feel that way instead.

RPF happens. It's probably always happened, and people on the Internet saying it's bad and weird isn't going to stop it from happening. And in the past, people in RPF fandoms have responded to other people thinking it's bad and weird by going "okay, then stay away from the RPF." With acknowledgement of the discomfort, and moving on.

At the core of all this conundrum are two conflicting feelings. The first is that people are interested enough in these creators and their narratives and their voices that they want to explore them in their own writing; the second that RPF makes people uncomfortable, for both general reasons and fandom-specific reasons we've now been over extensively. And it's not easy to be interested in and passionate about something that also makes you uncomfortable! Usually, there are really only two ways to deal with it. The first is to stop engaging with the thing entirely. And the other is to do some thinking and self reflection, identify why it makes you uncomfortable, and work through it until you get yourself to a place where you *are* comfortable (or, alternatively, make a slightly more informed choice to disengage with it).

Both of these require sitting with your discomfort and feeling it. They require that you acknowledge that feeling uncomfortable is both morally neutral and something you can and should unpack, and possibly change.

In the past, if someone was uncomfortable with RPF, they simply didn't engage with it. It wasn't a space for them. This fandom space has come up with a third option: insist that what they're doing is *totally separate* from what makes them uncomfortable. I think we should be suspicious of that new, third option.

Because now, instead of thinking about *why* RPF makes people uncomfortable (and maybe what that discomfort actually says about us), instead of asking questions about how to handle RPF in ways that are safe for everyone, instead of handling RPF as the "hidden behind the fourth wall" thing that it's been for decades because famous people don't need to see this kind of content about themselves, people just say "this is about characters. This isn't RPF." It doesn't make the problems go away: it makes it very hard to deal with any actual problems and, as I hope I've outlined throughout this insane piece of writing, creates new problems that obfuscate the original ones.

Not only do I think this whole phenomenon speaks to a greater fandom trend of both rejecting and moralizing discomfort (I am not the first person to notice the new go-to for people who hate a ship is now to start listing reasons why the ship is morally reprehensible and the same thing as IRL harm being caused), I think we need to be suspicious of relieving discomfort by simply—renaming it something that makes us less uncomfortable. The idea that, if we don't like something, we just *rename it* so it no longer sounds unpalatable and we can continue interacting with it as if it's now a totally different thing…you see why that's not the best mindset, right? You see how that can be weaponized?

If you would indulge me one more metaphor: if someone wasn't comfortable with the ethical implications of eating meat, starting a large-scale movement to start calling chicken a type of plant because that's less objectionable isn't going to address any of the reasons that person was uncomfortable. It's just means that a lot of chicken ends up where chicken isn't supposed to be and a lot of vegetarians are going to be in for an unpleasant surprise.

So—yeah. Way back at the start, I outlined my goals for writing this. I said that I was going to explore why RPF was written, why RPF made people uncomfortable, and then why maybe we shouldn't be so worried about it. And then I said I would explain what the DSMP is and why it's so weird, and if it's RPF or not, and why the fact that this space is so insistent it's not is so interesting to me. And now I've done all that.

But I guess the one question I haven't answered yet is directed at me, and it's just—*why?* Why did I spend this many words and a full year of my finite life writing a literal thesis on a niche fandom subject that I suspect is going to get me only negative attention? And when I started this project, I would have said "idk man, because this is what I think about in the shower and I needed to get it out of my head so my head didn't explode."

But, you know what? In the months I've spent writing, the world has boldly entered a new age of censorship based on pearl clutching and Think Of The The Children rhetoric, and every day I see more people terrified about being called a freak because a freak is the same thing as a pedophile and an abuser and someone who causes actual, irreparable harm to the vulnerable (but ignore the fact that conservatives call trans people and drag queens freaks, just don't worry about it).

So yeah, I *do* think mass fear of being weird is a social issue. Yes, I do think large groups of people feeling like they need to have authority figures give them an explicit blessing so they know they Aren't Weird or Doing Wrong is bad. Yes, I think the erosion of for-fun, non-corporate, fan-run internet spaces where fans don't need to worry about creators butting in or watching them is not only bad for fan culture, it was also the canary in the coal mine for the erosion and death of every place on the internet that isn't corporate-run or actively pumping out money.

Yes, I think the mass corporate sanitization of everything is bad, and I think the fact that this sanitization seems to have permeated the culture so deeply that it extends to the creative space that has traditionally been about young people safely playing with taboos and indulging in being weird is *bad.*

I think it's something we should question and think about. I hope this fucking thesis pointed you in that direction, too.

So, like. Go write your weird shit. *Read* your weird shit. You're not doing a thought crime and you're not doing a word document crime. Make friends with your discomfort and ask yourself why you feel that way—you might learn something when you find the answer. Keep it secret, keep it away from twitter, kill the cop in your head. Blessed be the gremlin hobbies and the teenagers who don't grow up normal. Thank you, MCYT fandom, for being a rich creative space filled with cool ideas, I've been enriched by experiancing you.

Welcome to the weird kids' table. RPF is fine.

Chapter End Notes

I am usually pretty bad about responding to AO3 comments for anxiety reasons, but because of the nature of this piece, I'll try to respond to people who want to discuss in good faith! I know I've been pretty casual about the idea, but like. I *would* prefer that you not tell me to die if you disagree with any of this. I'd prefer it if people were nice.

I have a tumblr, if you want to throw rocks at me there. Have a great day!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!